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SARAH ILES JOHNSTON



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# *Ancient Greek Divination*

Sarah Iles Johnston

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A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

This edition first published 2008  
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Blackwell Publishing was acquired by John Wiley & Sons in February 2007. Blackwell's publishing program has been merged with Wiley's global Scientific, Technical, and Medical business to form Wiley-Blackwell.

*Registered Office*

John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, United Kingdom

*Editorial Offices*

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK

The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available for this book.

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-4051-1572-8 (hardback)

ISBN: 978-1-4051-1573-5 (paperback)

Set in 9.75/12.5pt Utopia  
by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong  
Printed and bound in Singapore  
by Utopia Press Pte Ltd

For Fritz Graf

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# Acknowledgments

Some of the ideas presented in Chapters 2 and 3 were initially discussed during a graduate seminar at The Ohio State University in 2004; I thank my students for helping me improve both the quality of my ideas and the lucidity with which I presented them. I am particularly grateful to Bridget Buchholz, Norita Dobyns, Kristen Gentile and Adria Haluszka.

A shorter, preliminary version of the sections of Chapter 1 entitled “The History of the History of Divination” and “Divination and Magic” was included in my essay “Divining Divination,” which appeared in *Mantikē: Studies in Ancient Divination*, co-edited by myself and Peter T. Struck (Leiden 2005). Different versions of some of the material presented in Chapter 5 have been or soon will be published as articles, as well; these are cited in the bibliography.

I am, as always, grateful to Wendy Watkins, the Curator of Epigraphy at the Center for Epigraphical and Palaeographical Studies at The Ohio State University, for her help with epigraphical and visual materials. Amanda Gluibizzi of the Fine Arts Library at Ohio State helped as well. Credits for art work or illustrations used in the book are given in the figure captions; I thank the artists and museums for their cooperation. Al Bertrand at Blackwell Publishing went beyond the normal helpfulness of a good editor in reading the manuscript and advising me on several important points. I thank my student Stephen Maiullo for preparing the Index Locorum.

Beyond all others I thank the person to whom this book is dedicated, my colleague and husband, Fritz Graf, who has been an ongoing source of scholarly advice and constructive criticism for this project and many others, and who has periodically reminded me – although not often enough – that *neque semper arcum tendit Apollo*.

# Abbreviations

Antoninus Liberalis	Antoninus Liberalis, <i>Metamorphoses</i>
BCH	<i>Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique</i>
Cicero, <i>Divination</i>	<i>Concerning Divination</i>
Diodorus Siculus	Diodorus Siculus, <i>The Library of History</i>
Diogenes Laertius	Diogenes Laertius, <i>Lives of Eminent Philosophers</i>
FD	<i>Fouilles des Delphes</i>
FGrH	<i>Fragmente der griechischen Historiker</i> (ed. F. Jacoby)
Herodotus	Herodotus, <i>Histories</i>
Iamblichus, <i>Mysteries</i>	<i>Concerning the Mysteries</i>
IG	<i>Inscriptiones Graecae</i>
Lucan	Lucan, <i>The Civil War</i>
Migne, <i>PG</i>	J.-P. Migne, ed., <i>Patrologiae Cursus, series Graeca</i>
<i>Paroem. Gr.</i>	E. Leutsch and F.G. Schneidewin, <i>Corpus Paroemiographorum Graecorum</i>
Pausanias	Pausanias, <i>Description of Greece</i>
PDM	<i>Papyri Demoticae Magicae</i> or Demotic magical papyri
PGM	<i>Papyri Graecae Magicae</i> or Greek magical papyri
Plutarch, <i>Obsolescence</i>	<i>On the Obsolescence of Oracles</i>
Plutarch, <i>Oracles</i>	<i>The Oracles at Delphi No Longer Given in Verse</i>
SEG	<i>Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum</i>
SIG	<i>Sylloge Inscriptionum Graecorum</i>

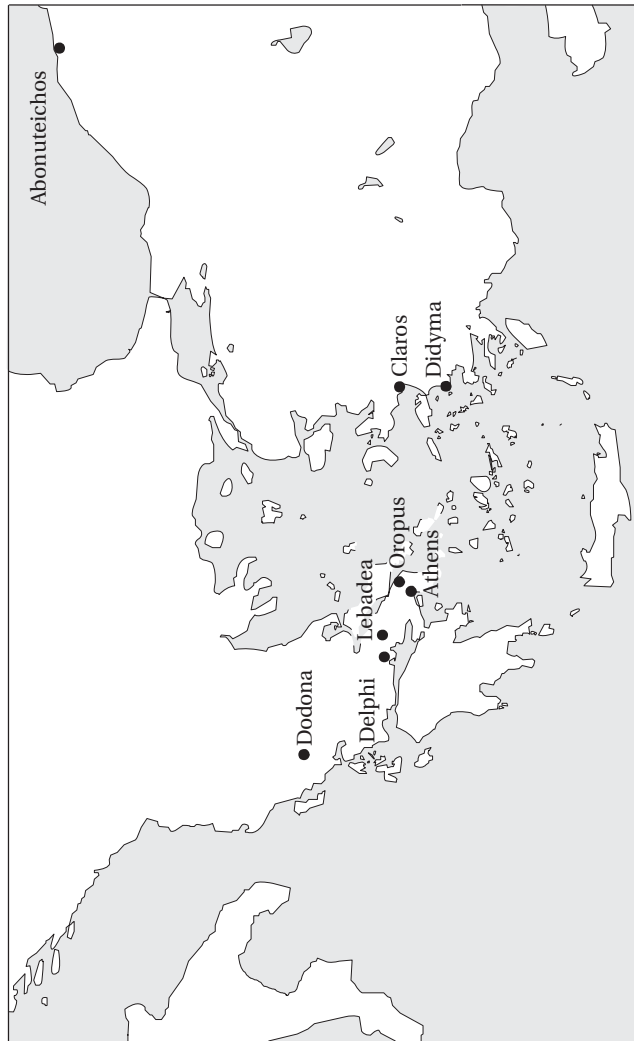
Sokolowski *LSS*F. Sokolowski, *Lois sacrées des cités grecques:  
Supplément*

Strabo

Strabo, *Geography*

Thucydides

Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*



*Figure 1* The Greek world, showing the major oracles

## CHAPTER 1

# *Why Divination?*



In the town where I live, a few blocks away from the campus where I teach, there is a shop that specializes in providing materials to people who want to foretell the future – and in training them to do it. For a modest fee, a student can enroll in a course that covers the basic techniques of Tarot reading, having first chosen a deck of cards from the many styles that the shop has for sale. Those who don't have time to learn the techniques can arrange for a reading with the shop's proprietor, instead.

The shop is anything but *outré*. It is well lit and inviting, on a street of renovated Victorian brick houses. Nearby are restaurants, a doctors' office and a coffee shop. The proprietor supports the community by awarding scholarships to university students, and encourages customers to bring along their skeptical parents and friends. This is no fusty fortune-teller with a crystal ball, hidden in the backroom of a more respectable business, but an establishment that has woven itself into the fabric of a large, Midwestern American city. At the time that I write, it has occupied its spot for 12 years; there is a demand for what it offers. Nor is my city unusual in having such a shop. If anything, a web-search suggests that we are somewhat underprovided in comparison with our neighbors. Even small towns in my state usually have a place to buy divinatory tools and to have one's future told.

One might still assume, however, that this shop and others like it serve only a small percentage of the American populace. The setting of my own local store – near a large college campus – suggests that interest in things like Tarot cards is transient and age-linked; perhaps playing at divining the future is the kind of thing one does when young. Leaving aside such “scientific” techniques as weather forecasting, twenty-first-century Americans do not believe that they can foresee the future, much less that they can affect it – at least they don't believe that officially. Take horoscopes,

for example, which are probably the most familiar method of prognosticating: in a poll conducted by the National Science Foundation in 2001, only 15 percent of respondents admitted reading their newspaper horoscopes every day or “quite often” (NSF 2002).

And yet we have to wonder how truthfully the respondents were answering. Only a few unassailably serious papers (the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times* being prime examples) choose not to run a daily horoscope column. Indeed, most newspapers position the horoscope fairly prominently in a section called “Entertainment,” “Arts,” “Leisure,” or some such thing, alongside the movie listings and the Sudoku puzzle. According to a 2005 survey commissioned by the Newspaper Association of America, this type of section, whatever you call it, is out-paced only by the local and national news sections in readership and, correspondingly, in costliness of advertising rates (NAA 2005). The money-crunchers at the newspapers must think that the average reader cares a lot about horoscopes, if they grant them such a prime position. If you peruse your newspaper electronically rather than in hard copy, you are likely to find the horoscope conveniently clickable on the side-bar menu alongside television programming, lottery numbers, sports results and the other sorts of things to which you might want easy access every day. And if you cruise Amazon.com ratings for books on astrology, you find that they are remarkably high (as are the ratings for books on Tarot reading).

In spite of what the NSF poll suggests, then, something attracts the average American to divining the future. The cynically-minded might point to the titles of the newspaper sections where the horoscopes are found. “Entertainment,” “Leisure” and even “Arts” can be taken to imply that prognostication is nothing more than a diversion (or that this is what people who indulge in it want to tell themselves, anyway). Perhaps it is only a diversion for some readers – but even this doesn’t mean we can dismiss it, for a game is only fun if you can suspend your disbelief to at least some degree. And for other readers it certainly is not just a game – the lucrative business of casting horoscopes and reading Tarot cards over the phone or internet could not be sustained as well as it is by people seeking idle amusement (let us not forget, either, that Nancy Reagan’s penchant for astrology was thought to have a big enough effect on her husband’s policies that it made the cover of *Time* magazine in May of 1988). Spirit mediums, to add a third popular form of divination to our list, advertise in the Yellow Pages of every American city – and are held up for admiration as the protagonists of popular television shows and movies. Divining the future, or at least thinking about divining the future, sits just as comfortably alongside computers, the internet, and everything else that we embrace as modern as it once sat alongside the telephone and

telegraph during the Victorian period, when interest in spirit mediums ran extraordinarily high. Indeed, the desire to gain special knowledge has frequently renewed itself by building upon technological advances: the Spiritualist movement of the 1850s modified the speaking trumpet in order to hear angels; Henry David Thoreau and others thought they could hear the music of the spheres humming over the telegraph wires (cf. Schmidt 2000).

This book is not, however, a study of contemporary western attitudes toward foretelling the future – fascinating though that would be. Rather, I have opened a volume entitled *Ancient Greek Divination* with a look at the present and recent past in order to introduce what will be a continuing theme – that is, the very pervasiveness of divination. Even if we think we don't believe in it personally, divination is here, and for whatever reason, as a culture we take some trouble to make the simpler forms of it readily available. Similarly, the Roman author Cicero opened his treatise on the topic with the magisterial statement "I know of no people, whether they be learned and refined or barbaric and ignorant, that does not consider that future things are indicated by signs, and that it is possible for certain people to recognize those signs and predict what will happen" (*Divination* 1.2). It's likely that in antiquity, most people practiced or witnessed some form of divination at least once every few days: divination was always part of offering sacrifices to the gods, usually part of deciding whether to undertake a military maneuver, often part of puzzling out a bewildering dream, sometimes part of diagnosing and treating an illness or choosing a bride, and even, sometimes, part of understanding why your body was twitching or your child was sneezing. Walking through the ancient marketplace, you might glimpse a "belly-talker" who carried a prophetic spirit around inside of herself, an Orphic priest who could tell you what it meant if a weasel had crossed your path, or a state delegation setting out to consult the Delphic Oracle on a matter of public good.

Ancient divination, moreover, adapted itself to different cultures and different technologies just as readily as contemporary divination has. Cicero follows his initial claim with a list of some of the choices available: the Assyrians prefer to divine by looking at the sky because they live on plains, where the heavens are unobstructed by mountains; the Cilicians, Pisidians, Pamphylians prefer bird divination; the Greeks like to consult the Oracles at Delphi and Dodona, and so on (1.2 and cf. 1.91–4). Some degree of variability and adaptability is characteristic of all religious phenomena, but ancient divination was particularly pliant. A relatively straightforward goal – to gain knowledge of what humans would not otherwise know – manifested itself in a variety of ways that combined and



recombined themselves. The myriad means reflect a diversity that is culturally specific, but the underlying persistence of desire for divinatory knowledge reflects a basic human need.

### *The Ancient Discussions*

One thing does distinguish the Greeks and Romans from us, however, and that is their degree of self-reflection about the topic. Already in the mid-fifth century, intellectuals debated whether divination worked or not (Herodotus defends it against unnamed critics at 8.77) and as the centuries rolled on, they composed numerous treatises that took on the questions of whether it worked, how it worked and why the gods (or whatever) had established it. Many of these treatises survive only as titles or at best as summaries in Cicero's own discussion, but we know enough to at least sketch the central issues, which I will do briefly in this section. More detailed treatments of some issues will be found later in this book; the introduction to the first volume of August Bouché-Leclercq's *Histoire de la divination dans l'antiquité* (1879–82), now nearly 140 years old, is still the most complete discussion available, although it must be supplemented with the many notes in Arthur Stanley Pease's two-volume commentary on Cicero's *Concerning Divination* (1920/3) and now also with David Wardle's (2006) commentary on Book 1 of the same (esp. pp. 28–36).

But before we go on to that, it's worth thinking a bit more about *why* divination so fascinated ancient intellectuals. In contrast to divination, other religious behaviors were seldom examined very closely. We hear very little about sacrifice, for instance, which was considered one of the defining acts of ancient worship. (Lucian has a short and cynical essay on the topic, and Porphyry has a long treatise on why humans should abstain from animal flesh, which included abstaining from sacrifice, but otherwise, mostly what we have are brief comments that, far from asking how and why sacrifice works, assume that we already know.) Similarly, we seldom find ancient texts discussing prayer in a critical manner. Why then did divination, in contrast, draw so much attention?

Part of the answer is that divination more clearly involves participants in a two-way conversation. When you pray or sacrifice, you usually don't get an immediate response – sometimes you have to wait a few months to see whether the crops come in well or whether you conceive and deliver a healthy baby. When you cast the dice or read the entrails or put a question to the Pythia, you get an answer almost immediately. *Interpreting* it may take you longer, but at least you know that someone has heard you. Divination, then, more than any other religious act,

confirms not only that the gods exist, but that they pay attention to us. The Stoic arguments for the validity of divination were built on this assumption, in fact: if divinity exists, it must be beneficent; if it is beneficent, then it will find a way to communicate with us because it wishes us to steer our lives according to divine will. (And vice versa, of course: if divination can be shown to exist, then so must divinity.) The salient questions then become, how do the gods communicate and how can we most effectively take part in this communication ourselves? These questions lead, in turn, to all kinds of interesting ruminations about how the physical and metaphysical worlds operate. Assuming that the gods communicate with us through the entrails of sacrificial animals, for instance, how does a properly informative liver end up in the specific bull or ram that someone chooses for sacrifice? Debates over divination sat at the tip of a very large iceberg of other questions about how the gods and the universe worked.

The variety of techniques employed in divination inevitably increases the number of questions. Enthused prophecy (prophecy whereby a god speaks through the mouth of a human) prompts consideration of what divinity is, existentially, and how it could ever join itself, even temporarily, to a feeble human body. Plutarch tried to solve this dilemma with a complex picture of the soul of the Pythia coming together with Apollo in a sort of vortex of whirlwinds; Lucan toyed with the possibility that what the Stoics called divine *pneuma*, or “breath,” which permeated the world, was inhaled by the Pythia and then struck her soul with prophetic knowledge – as we’ll see both below and in Chapter 2, there were other explanations for enthusiastic prophecy on offer, too (Plutarch, *Oracles* 404e–f; Lucan 5.88–99). The Stoics also thought that *pneuma* sustained *sympatheia*, a force that bound together the otherwise disparate parts of the cosmos, and they used *sympatheia* to explain techniques of divination that depended on reading the appearance or behavior of objects in the physical world. The good diviner knew about the sympathetic links between, say, the appearance of a night-owl during the day and political insurrection and could therefore predict what was going to happen when such a bird showed up. But this prompted such questions as how we should distinguish between the art of the diviner and the art of the doctor, the farmer, the sailor or anyone else who made it his business to learn how one thing signified another that was yet to come – is it divination to know that an olive crop will be abundant by looking at blooms early in the season, or is that just good arboriculture? Is it divination to predict rain by looking at a dark cloud, or is that simply the sort of practical meteorology that every reasonably intelligent person picks up the course of life? And what had established *sympatheia* in the first place? Fate? Lurking behind that possibility was the gigantic one of whether humans had free will: if a network of *sympatheia*

had been knit into the cosmos at the beginning of time, setting off complex chains of events, then mortals could scarcely expect to change the future. And if they couldn't change it, then what was the purpose of divination, as Lucian's *Demonax* pointed out (*Demonax* 37)? Dream interpretation often was explained by assuming that the human soul could disconnect itself from the sleeping body, but this led to questions about the nature of the soul itself, and what, exactly, it was encountering while wandering around. With all of these questions and others to ask, it isn't so surprising, then, that divination prompted more focused thought than other types of religious behavior.

Even before critical discussions begin to appear in our sources, we see attempts to collect and organize divinatory information. Hesiod, at the end of his *Works and Days*, assembles a list of lucky days that his readers should heed: the eleventh and twelfth days of the month, for example, are good for shearing sheep; the twelfth is also good for setting up a new project on a loom. The twenty-seventh is good for opening a jar of wine. Certain days are good for women to be born on, others are good for men – although the specific day will determine the niceties of a man's personality. Hesiod ends his list of days, and the poem itself, with the remark: "Happy and blessed is he who knows all these things, and does his work without offending the gods – judging the birds and avoiding transgressions" (lines 826–8). The *Works and Days* was, among other things, a poem purporting to scold Hesiod's badly behaved brother, Perses, and tell him how to live properly – thus, it is not surprising that we finish up with something more or less like this statement, but two things are notable. First, having knowledge of "lucky days" counts as part of living properly. Perhaps we wouldn't call this knowledge "divinatory" in the strictest sense of the word, but it comes close: like omen lists or catarchic astrological charts, a list of days and the activities appropriate for each of them foretells what will happen if a certain act occurs at a certain time (indeed, in the ancient Near East, more extended hemerologies – that is, lists of lucky days and unlucky days on which to do things – were recorded in the same style and contexts as other omen lists). That Hesiod could compose a detailed list of these predictions (all but eight days of the month are characterized by him as being good or bad for something) suggests that already in the archaic period, a fair amount of energy had been spent on collecting and organizing this material. We are still nowhere near to the really extensive, detailed lists of omens and astrological patterns that scribes had long been producing in Near Eastern cultures (writing came later to Greece than to the ancient Near East) but the concept is present: collect, organize and then disseminate predicative information.

Also interesting is Hesiod's advice to "judge the birds." The verb I have translated as "judge," "*krinō*," and its cognates are parts of words that signify divination and the experts who perform it: an *oneirokritēs* is a dream interpreter, for example, and an *ornithokritēs* is an interpreter of birds. What Hesiod advises us to do at the end of his poem, then, is not merely to evaluate birds in some casual sense – are they healthy this year? – or even with a farmer's eye – are they the kind that are likely to eat my grain crop? – but to interpret what their appearances portend. Already a little earlier in the poem, when listing lucky days, Hesiod had advised that the fourth of the month was potentially a good day to lead home a wife – but only after the eager bridegroom had judged (*krinas*) the bird signs. It's not surprising that another poetic treatise called the *Ornithomanteia* (*Bird Omens*) was grafted on to the end of Hesiod's *Works and Days* at some point. Already, Apollonius of Rhodes had charged that the *Ornithomanteia* was spurious, but his need to assert this suggests that it was an accepted part of Hesiod's work during the Hellenistic period – lists of birds and their meanings were the sort of thing you expected a famous poet to provide (in this case as in others, the role of the scribe as a provider of religiously important information – so familiar in the Near East – was taken on in Greece by the poet). Throughout Greek antiquity, we hear about other lists of this kind, or treatises that similarly collected and organized such information. In the third century BCE, for example, an author who called himself Melampus, after a famous diviner of myth, composed one treatise on bodily twitches and their meanings and another on birthmarks and their significance. Books on dream interpretation collected types of dreams and paired each with what it signified – the only surviving example is that of Artemidorus, from the second century CE, but we know that others existed far earlier (Apollonius of Rhodes ap. scholiast on Hesiod, *Works and Days* 828 [p. 259.3–5 Pertusi = Hesiod *testimonium* 80]; Artemidorus, *Interpretation of Dreams*).

Another sort of divinatory list comes in a long speech made by Prometheus in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*. Prometheus, a paradigmatic culture hero, claims to have done many things for mortals, including:

I devised the many methods of divination (*mantikē*), and I first judged what truth there is in dreams, and I first made known to mortals the meaning of chance utterances, hard to interpret, and of the omens one encounters while on the road; and I defined the flight of crooked-clawed birds – I explained which of them were auspicious or inauspicious by nature, and what their ways of life were and their dislikes and likes of one another and their alliances; and I also taught mortals about the smoothness of entrails and what color the gall ought to have in order to please the gods, and all

about the dappled beauty of the lobe of the liver. It was I who burned thigh-bones wrapped in fat and the long shank bone, thus leading mortals down the path of this darkly-signifying art, and it was I who opened their eyes to signs that are fiery and yet dim to understanding. (lines 484–99)

In other words, Prometheus taught mortals a variety of divinatory techniques: dream interpretation, cledonomanancy, augury, the reading of entrails, and empyromancy. I will define and discuss the characteristics of each of these in later chapters, but at the moment the important thing is that the list could be made at all during the first half of the fifth century: “divination” was by now a conceptual category not too different from our own; it had taken within its embrace pursuits and techniques of markedly different types. Each of these would always have its own name as well, but *mantikē* was by now a unified field, a thing that could be treated ontologically as a whole. Notably, none of the other contributions that Prometheus claims to have made to the welfare of humanity (carpentry, time-telling, animal husbandry, seamanship, medicine, the mining of minerals) is treated in anything near the same detail. The emphasis on divination may be partially thematic (the play is about Prometheus’ possession of certain knowledge concerning the future that he refuses to share with Zeus, and Prometheus prophesies at length to another character in the play) but the tenor of the passage also suggests that the author took pride in composing this list of divinatory techniques – perhaps we are near here to the moment when the category had first begun to gel. In later antiquity, lists like Prometheus’ become much longer: Artemidorus mentions 17 methods of divination, for example, about half of which he says are unreliable (including divination from cheese, whatever that is) and the lexicographical encyclopedia known as the *Suda* goes on at great length, adducing equally obscure methods such as divination by flies (Artemidorus, *Interpretation of Dreams* 2.69; *Suda* s.v. *prophēteia*).

My use of the word “techniques” in the last but one sentence is important, however. What Prometheus leaves out of his list is any sort of enthusiastic divination – the Oracles at Delphi and Dodona are mentioned elsewhere in the play, but not here. Implicitly, then, the author distinguishes enthusiasm from techniques that Prometheus can *teach* to mortals. This distinction becomes explicit in our earliest critical discussion of divination, from Plato’s *Phaedrus*, which was written perhaps fifty to seventy years after the *Prometheus Bound*. Socrates discusses four types of divine madness there – divinatory, purificatory, poetic and erotic – and the particular blessings that each brings. Regarding the first of these, he reminds his friend Phaedrus of all the good advice that the Sibyls and

the priestesses at Dodona and Delphi have given to cities and individuals while in a state of enthusiasm; while in their normal state, they were unable to do anything. Enthusiastic madness, which Socrates calls “the greatest of [divine] gifts,” is to be preferred, he continues, over the sane and utterly non-divine habit of enquiring into the future by means of birds and other signs, which depend on the diviner’s purely human understanding and the information he has acquired.

Later authors would call the second type of divination “artificial” (or “technical” or “learned”) and the first type “natural” (or “untechnical” or “unlearned”). Typically, natural divination was understood to include enthusiasm and dreams, and to be the older and more reliable form of divination because it was more directly communicated by the gods; dreams and enthusiasm were the only forms of divination that Aristotle and the Peripatetic philosophers found completely acceptable, in fact. Technical was understood to include everything else – anything that depended on acquired human skills, such as the reading of entrails, the behavior of birds and the heavenly bodies or the interpretation of portents. As we will see in later chapters, the distinction is more heuristic than real outside of intellectual circles: some diviners of myth were experts in both natural and technical methods of divination, and some oracular shrines offered both enthusiastic divination and some form of technical as well. And, as we have seen in the passage from the *Prometheus Bound* cited above, although dreams were understood as a “natural” method of divination, humans might need or wish to acquire special skills through which to interpret them. Nonetheless, the fact that ancient intellectuals so persistently made the distinction between natural and artificial types of divination is interesting: although they understood all kinds of divination to be a cooperative effort between gods and mortals, they were acutely aware that some forms relied more on human input – and thereby offered more room, perhaps, for intentional or unintentional human distortion (Peripatetics: Cicero, *Divination* 1.5. Division into natural and technical, e.g., Cicero, *Divination* 1.11–12, 1.34, 1.72, 1.109–11, 2.26–7).

Another important idea that we first glimpse in Plato is that divination is empowered by cosmic mediators called *daimones*, who serve as messengers between the gods and mortals. In the *Symposium*, Socrates quotes his friend Diotima, a woman well versed in divine things, as having once said to him:

[*daimones*] are interpreters and ferrymen, carrying divine things to mortals and mortal things to gods; requests and sacrifices from below and commandments and answers from above. Being midway between, [the *daimones*] make

each half supplement the other, so that the whole becomes unified. Through them are conveyed all divination (*mantikē*) and all priestly crafts concerning sacrifices, initiations, incantations, all prophetic power (*manteia*) and magic. For the divine does not mix with the mortal, and it is only through the mediation of [the *daimones*] that mortals can have any interaction with the gods, either while awake or while asleep. (202e–203a)

This idea was to have a long history, particularly when applied to enthusiastic divination. Its attraction lay, especially for later writers, in the fact that one could retain the traditional idea that oracles were divinely inspired and yet avoid associating Apollo or any other god too closely with the mortal bodies through whose lips the prophecies issued forth: it was really the *daimones* who bridged the gap and made the contact. Similarly, the Neoplatonists of late antiquity posited that it was the light emitted by divinity, rather than divinity itself, that entered the Pythia and other enthused mediums, as I will discuss in Chapters 2 and 3, and that it was a light-filled entity called the *pneuma* or “vehicle of the soul” within each of us that moderated the transmission of divine light into our individual souls – further strengthening the boundary between divine and mortal even as it provided a means of crossing it. Aristotle also adapted the daimonic idea for one of his several theories of dream divination, arguing that although sending dreams was below the dignity of the gods, dreams nonetheless had a creditable origin insofar as they emanated from the daimonic realm. The passage has puzzled modern readers – particularly since Aristotle goes on to equate the daimonic realm with Nature – but the essential idea of attributing dreams to the *daimones* that mediate between humans and gods is clearly there, whatever else we may say (*On Divination Through Dreams* 463b12–15).

In one of Plutarch’s dialogues, a group of friends – Cleombrotus, Demetrius, Ammonius, Didymus, Heracleon, Philip and Plutarch’s brother, Lamprias – discuss the daimonic theory at length in an effort to explain why the Pythia at Delphi has fallen silent in recent years. Cleombrotus says that the *daimones* have simply vacated Delphi – they may return again one day and reanimate it, as a musician returns to an instrument and makes it sound out again after a long silence. Demetrius wants more details, however: how, exactly, do *daimones* make oracles work? Ammonius replies that *daimones* are really just disembodied souls, and that as such, they can interact with the soul of the Pythia and tell her what is to come – like mixes with like. Lamprias adds that even embodied souls possess the power to foresee the future – although embodiment usually clouds it nearly to the point of uselessness. When we sleep, or when we are near death, however (that is, when our souls are most loosely tethered to our bodies), even our



embodied souls can see the future. He then slides into what is usually a separate explanation for how Delphi works, which we already saw Lucan allude to and which we will examine in detail in Chapter 2: he says that the earth sends up a “potency” or a “vapor” that affects the soul of the Pythia, enabling it to prophesy. When Ammonius and Philip object that, having first expelled the gods from divination, Lamprias is now expelling the *daimones* as well, he explains that there are always two causes for any phenomenon: the divine and the physical. In an immediate sense, the Pythia may be inspired by the vapor, but it is the *daimones* who oversee the whole process, ensuring that it works smoothly (Plutarch, *Obsolescence* 416f–438e; cf. his *Isis and Osiris* 361a).

Thus, Lamprias (who some scholars assume represents the opinions of the author, his brother) manages to have his cake and eat it, too: like a good Platonist, he maintains the importance of intermediary *daimones* in divination and yet he embraces at the same time the more “scientific” theory of vapors. It wasn’t only pagan Platonists who were attracted by the daimonic theory, however: the Christian fathers (most of whom had training in Platonic philosophy) took it up eagerly as well, although in a very different spirit. For them, every pagan god, including Apollo, was really a demon – so of course they were happy to believe that it was *daimones*, that is, demons, who operated the oracles. Indeed, some of them suggested that these demons went so far as to literally enter the womb of the Pythia in order to speak out through her mouth (see for example the remarks of John Chrysostom, quoted on page 40).

Augustine spends quite a bit of time thinking all of this through, and expands the daimonic theory beyond enthusiasm to potentially any kind of divination. He starts from another perfectly good, long-established Platonic idea: *daimones* are creatures of the *aer* (that is, the part of the cosmos that lies between the earth and the heavens). They must, therefore, be aery by nature and able to move very swiftly. This explains why people in one place can “divine” what is happening in another: what is actually happening is that *daimones* are flying from one place to the other and telling the diviners what has just happened; the diviners then pretend to have discovered it by their own arts. Augustine famously exemplifies this idea by telling of how the destruction of the Alexandrian Serapeum in 391 CE was known almost immediately in his hometown of Carthage. As aery creatures, *daimones* can also penetrate the minds of mortals, discover what they are thinking and then convey this information to others – supplying diviners, again, with the means of making impressive statements. Finally, *daimones* are by nature very long-lived, according to Platonic theory. For Augustine, this suggests that they have had time to develop powers of observation that we short-lived mortals lack.



By reading the many subtle signs that nature provides, *daimones* could miraculously “foretell” such things as earthquakes and floods (Augustine, *Concerning the Divination of Demons*, esp. 1.1, 1.3 [7], 1.5 [9], 1.8 [12]; cf. Graf 2002).

But what exactly are the *daimones* telling the diviners – or rather, how are they telling it? Augustine, who was one of the first to theorize about what we now call semiotics – and who applied his semiotic theories to the practical challenges of living the Christian life – concluded that communication between humans and *daimones* was anchored in the same principle that enabled all communication: the two parties had agreed on a system of signs and their meanings. A good Christian who wanted to avoid entanglements with *daimones* had an easy way of doing so, therefore: he could simply refuse to participate any longer in their discourse – that is, refuse to read omens or any other kinds of divinatory sign in the agreed-upon way. For Augustine, then, all divination, including the “technical” forms, depended on *daimones*. The same idea underlies some divinatory spells in the magical papyri that were composed at about the same time as Augustine was writing, as we will see in Chapter 5: *daimones* or minor gods called “assistants” are expected to provide divinatory information to the magician (Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 2.37).

The most significant discussions of technical divination took place among the Stoics, however, and were rooted in the idea of *sympatheia*, that force that pervades the cosmos and knits it together. Cicero mentions two books on divination by the Stoic Chrysippus (plus two more specifically on oracles and dreams), one book by the Stoic Diogenes of Babylon and two by the Stoic Antipater. These names take us from the second century BCE back to the second half of the third century – and the chain can be extended backwards even further, into the late fourth or very early third century BCE, if we are willing to assume that a book called *On Signs*, written by Zeno, the very founder of Stoicism, addressed divinatory signs in particular. Posidonius extends the chain in the opposite direction, into the first century BCE, and outdoes all his predecessors by composing five books on the topic. These are now lost, but Cicero, who was Posidonius’ friend, relied on his lines of argument when crafting Quintus’ Stoicizing defense of divination in Book 1 of *Concerning Divination* (see, e.g., 1.6, and compare Diogenes Laertius 7.4 and 7.149; see further Pease 1920/3: 60–2 and Wardle 2006: 28–36, 108–14).

The most straightforward explication of the idea of divinatory *sympatheia* comes when Quintus is challenged with the ridiculousness of imagining that the gods would stoop to orchestrating every omen – a charge that had been laid against divination by the Epicureans. Quintus replies:

According to the Stoic doctrine, the gods are not directly responsible for every fissure in the liver or for every song of a bird; since, manifestly, that would not be seemly or proper in a god and furthermore is impossible. But, in the beginning, the universe was so created that certain results would be preceded by certain signs, which are given sometimes by entrails and by birds, sometimes by lightning, by portents, and by stars, sometimes by dreams, and sometimes by persons in a frenzy. And these signs do not often deceive the persons who observe them properly . . . Assuming that we concede the proposition that there is a divine power which pervades the lives of mortals, it is not hard to understand the principle directing those premonitory signs which we see come to pass. (1.118; Falconer's translation, adapted)

In other words, when the world was young, the gods had set things up so that some events always preceded others; it is our job to learn how to decode the signs of those connections. This doesn't settle the issue completely, however; the question then becomes exactly *how* the divine, immanent power of *sympatheia* makes divination work – what ensures that the proper signs are always tied to the proper events? Leaving aside the two means of natural divination in his list for the moment (dreams and frenzy), Quintus offers a couple of possibilities for explaining the technical methods. Is it possible that the divine power directs the sacrificing priest to choose an animal whose liver will be properly informative? Could it be that there is some divine sleight of hand at the last moment, that changes the shape of its liver as the knife falls? These possibilities are not dismissed, but in the end, Quintus retreats to quite a different, and typically Stoic, defense of *sympatheia* and its empowerment of divination. Understanding the immediate cause of any divinatory occurrence is irrelevant, he insists; what matters is the simple fact that he has been able to adduce so many historical cases where divination worked. Later philosophers such as Proclus, not content with that, returned to the problem and elaborated the theory of *sympatheia* into “chains” that stretched from the ultimate source of divine power, which sat transcendently above the world, through each level of the cosmos down into the smallest plants, minerals and animals. Things on the same “chain” resonated with each other and this resonance underlay both successful technical divination and successful magic. In the first case, you simply had to learn to read the resonances, and in the second, to make the resonances happen yourself (Struck 2004: Chapter 7).

One of the most interesting things about the sympathetic explanation for divination, as Peter Struck has discussed, is that its apologists had to enforce a semantic system that was founded on mystification. That is, if the links between a given occurrence and what it portends were as obvious as the link between a crowing rooster and the coming dawn,

divination would cease to be a special art – anyone would be able to do it. The technical diviner presents himself as performing an inductive task, then – he does not make his predictions by deducing “rational” relationships between things. He is also empirical – diviners must acquire and pass on to one another the correspondences that they have discovered. As antiquity wore on, this picture of *sympatheia* and the obscure signs it produced helped to mold the nascent field of literary criticism: by interpreting literature, the first allegorists understood themselves, like technical diviners, to be discovering hidden meanings that would unlock the secrets of the cosmos (Struck 2004: Chapters 5–7; cf. Cicero, *Divination* 1.12–13).

I temporarily left aside Quintus’ mention of dreams and enthusiastic prophecy – the two forms of natural divination. The Stoics defended these as well – and Chrysippus went so far as to fill a book with collected responses from Delphi. In Cicero’s treatise, Quintus offers two lines of defense for enthusiastic divination. He begins with an explanation that we will see again in the next chapter – that there was a special gas or vapor underground at Delphi that had the power to kindle the soul of the Pythia with inspiration. As was clear already in the passage from Lucan that I mentioned at the beginning of this section, this idea was easy to reconcile with the Stoic concept of *pneuma*. Later in the treatise, Quintus emphasizes instead that each human soul, having been derived from a great divine soul, has a capacity for divination. In some people, this is very highly developed. When the soul of such a person withdraws itself from the body, stimulated by a divine impulse, it can prophesy (1.37–8 and 1.79; 1.66–71 and 1.110–15). The two ideas are not mutually exclusive; as Lamprias probably would have said, the vapor provides the physical cause of enthusiasm and the nature of the soul provides the divine cause.

Dreams drew more extended attention; indeed, the discussion of dreams that Cicero puts into Quintus’ mouth is the most detailed of all his discussions. As in the case of technical divination, Quintus is made to argue mostly from example rather than from explanation, adducing numerous situations in which dreams had correctly forecast what was to come. Implicit, however, is the same opinion as was adduced to explain enthused divination – that the human soul has a natural talent for divination when it is not impeded by the concerns of the body – for Quintus cites Plato’s explanation of why some dreams are unreliable and others reliable: the unreliable dreams occur when the soul is not in a proper state to dream clearly because the dreamer has eaten too much or drunk too much (that is, the irrational part of the soul has been given the energy to tyrannize the rational part). Variations of this idea go back even further – Pythagoras is said to have forbidden beans because flatulence impedes

clear dreaming – and it recurs frequently (Aristotle said in his treatise on dreams that the real root of the problem was the heat produced by food that the body had ingested – in extreme cases, this might prevent one from dreaming at all). Later elaborations posited that dreams were most accurate near dawn, when the effects of the previous night's dinner were dissipated – although an especially heavy meal could spoil those as well. Some theorists formally stated the obvious, that there were two types of dreams altogether: those that were predicative and those that were not only distorted but completely meaningless because they had been induced by food or drink or other physical stimuli of waking life. The Hippocratics similarly argued that dreams were mere reflections of bodily disturbances, but stressed that this didn't necessarily mean that they were useless: the treatise *On Regimen* outlined a series of connections between dreams and bodily conditions that could be used diagnostically by a well-trained doctor (Plato, *Republic* 571c–d; Cicero, *Divination* 1.62; Aristotle, *On Dreams* 461a; Artemidorus, *Interpretation of Dreams* 1.7; Struck 2004: 183–7; Hippocrates, *On the Sacred Disease* 18 and *On Regimen*, esp. 1.2).

Even Democritus (the founder of the Atomist school, which otherwise rejected divination) found merit in the idea of divinatory dreams: he understood everything in the world to be continually sloughing off *eidōla* (“phantoms”), which then might penetrate the soul of a sleeping person, causing him or her to dream of what these *eidōla* represent. Because these *eidōla* emanate even from another person's thoughts or emotions, we sometimes dream of what another person has been thinking or feeling, which leads to a form of precognition. In autumn, when the air is rougher than usual, these *eidōla* don't travel very well and our dreams are therefore rather faded and ineffectual (Cicero, *Divination* 2.120, Plutarch, *Table Talk* 8.10.2).

We learn more about the ways that the Stoics explained dream divination when Quintus tells us that Posidonius posited three reasons that the soul was able to divine accurately in dreams: first, because it was itself akin to the divine (being composed of the same *pneuma* as pervaded the rest of the cosmos – an idea that would be adapted by the Neoplatonists into the theory mentioned above, whereby *pneuma* mediates between the soul and the divine, enabling the soul to make predictions – e.g., Synesius, *On Dreams*); second, because the air is full of other, divine souls that convey true information to the soul of the sleeper; and third, because the gods converse with the soul when the body is asleep. All of these explanations, in one way or another, are underpinned by the assumption that the soul is quite different from – even at odds with – the body, and that the two can operate independently of one another when the body is subdued. The separability of the body and soul also was used to explain

why the soul was able to prophesy when the body is on the verge of dying, according to Posidonius (Cicero, *Divination* 1.64). In fact, among the intellectuals who tried to explain dream divination, only Democritus developed a theory that did not depend to at least some degree on the soul's independence from the body. Aristotle toyed with a variation of Democritus' idea when he suggested that all things in the world cause movements to pass through the air, some of which come to souls while a person sleeps, causing pictures from which mortals can then derive predictions (the best nights for dreaming, he adds, are therefore windless), but even here he predicates his theory on the assumption that when the body sleeps, the soul is freer to receive these impressions (*On Divination through Dreams* 464a). Artemidorus took the idea in a new direction; his rather complex theory of dream divination assumes not only the traditional idea that some outside agent (Artemidorus refuses to use the words "god" or "*daimon*") presents images to the sleeper's soul, but also that the soul itself takes part in choosing which predicative images will appear in its dreams (Struck 2005).

Popular belief went its own way as occasion demanded: Pindar expresses the idea of the soul's separability in an epinician poem, which suggests that this explanation was fairly well known already in the fifth century, but Homer and many other, later authors present dreams as standing at the head of the bed or next to the sleeper, with no implication that the soul is anywhere but where it normally is, or that the dream is anything but an actual entity. Similarly, when people dreamt at incubatory healing sanctuaries, they assumed that Asclepius or another divine healer was truly present, laying hands upon them.

However one explained it, confidence in dream divination motivated many people to write handbooks on what dreams meant, as I mentioned earlier. Notably, the production of such books rests on the assumption that at least some dreams must be *interpreted* – that is, that this supposedly natural form of divination nonetheless often required humans to apply some technical, learned skill before putting dreams to use, as Aeschylus' Prometheus already indicated. Artemidorus took this to an extreme, not only offering long lists of dreams and the future events to which he had discovered, after interviewing numerous dreamers, that they corresponded (e.g., "dreaming of boxwood, myrtles and rose laurels signifies wanton women," 2.24), but also outlining many criteria that had to be taken into account before a newly created interpretation could be relied upon, including some that would seem familiar to us, such as the dreamer's age, occupation and health (e.g., "dreaming that one has teeth of gold is auspicious only for literary men . . . to others it signifies that there will be funerary pyres in the house," 1.31; cf. 1.3, 1.8, 1.9). An interpreter

who wished to follow Artemidorus' system would either have to study it closely for quite some time or keep the handbook ready; Artemidorus' opinion that "the interpretation of dreams is nothing other than the juxtaposition of similarities" (2.25) would not have been shared by most of his readers. But in any case, Artemidorus' book underscores, again, how artificial is the neat divination between natural and technical forms of divination.

### *The History of the History of Divination*

Oddly enough, the ancient enthusiasm for talking about divination didn't transfer very well to modern students of antiquity. In 1974, Jean-Pierre Vernant, one of the twentieth century's most admired scholars of ancient religion, published an edited volume entitled *Divinatione et rationalité*, to which four classicists (Roland Crahay, Luc Brisson, Jeannie Carlier and Denise Grodzynski), as well as scholars of early China (Léon Vandermeersch, Jacques Gernet), Mesopotamia (Jean Bottéro) and Africa (Anne Retel-Laurentin), were invited to contribute. In the introduction, Vernant suggested that the study of divination could contribute to our understanding of ancient mentalities, that is, of the: "type of rationality . . . expressed in the game of divinatory procedure, the apparatus of oracular techniques and symbolisms, and the classificatory frameworks used by the seer to sort out, organize, manipulate and interpret the information on which his competence is based" (Vernant 1991: 303). It could also be used, he continued, to illuminate the structures of authority inherent in a culture – how we are "to situate the relations of the seer to other figures such as the king, priest and judge, who, in their roles, also have a power of decision." He encouraged scholars to take these issues as new starting points from which a better understanding of divination could be reached.

In inviting research on divination, Vernant was reacting to what had been a virtual absence of attention to its theoretical aspects among students of the ancient world. Considering the reasons for this dearth, and the history behind it, will help us to understand the current state of work on the topic. Things had started out promisingly enough in the late nineteenth century: Auguste Bouché-Leclercq published his massive four-volume compendium of information, *Histoire de la divination dans l'antiquité*. At the turn of the century, the eminent historian Jakob Burckhardt offered "Die Erkundung der Zukunft" as a (now almost forgotten) part of his *Griechische Kulturgeschichte*, and in 1921 and 1924, Theodor Hopfer published the two volumes of his *Griechische-ägyptischer Offenbarungszauber*, which set out to treat revelation in the context of the late antique

magical papyri (in reality, Hopfner ended up treating not only revelation, but virtually every kind of magical practice, divinatory or otherwise, that appeared anywhere in ancient sources; soon after, he offered important shorter studies of some specific types of magical divination). The first book-length English treatment of divination was provided in 1913 by W.R. Halliday, who had just earned his degree at Oxford under the tutelage of Gilbert Murray and L.R. Farnell, with outside help from the Cambridge scholar Jane Ellen Harrison – the last of whom he thanked at length in his preface for her “unwearying kindness in suggestion, comment, criticism and encouragement.”

In signaling his debts to Murray and particularly to Harrison, Halliday aligned himself with what we now call the Cambridge Ritualists, an affiliation that shows itself on almost every page of his book. *Greek Divination: A Study of its Methods and Principles* was not really a survey of the topic (he chose not to treat enthused divination at all, for example, except insofar as it peripherally became relevant to other matters) but rather was Halliday’s contribution to solidifying ideas that were dear to the Ritualists’ hearts, most notably that there was an inner core of primitivity in Greek religion; that as a result, there were deep similarities between Greek religion and tribal religions that could be elucidated through methods of ethnological research (the book draws extensively on cross-cultural comparisons); and that the figure of the sacred king was central to Greek religious thought and social practice (Halliday argues that the figure of the diviner is to be derived from that of king). Halliday also connected divination very closely to magic, positing that the diviner was a sort of failed magician – the magician promises to change the future whereas the diviner, having realized that he cannot change it, promises only to predict it. The first main chapter of the book, indeed, is entitled “Magic” and offers an extensive analysis that is indebted to the Oceanic idea of *mana* (the impersonal supernatural force inherent in sacred objects or individuals) – a concept that was also much used by Harrison in her book *Themis*, which had appeared the year before. In another chapter, “Divination and Magic,” Halliday argued that most divination is a form of magical speech. He returned to magic here and there throughout the book.

*Greek Divination* does not seem to have made much of an impact. One of the few acknowledgments of its appearance was a review in a 1913 issue of the *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, which praises Halliday for using “comparative spectacles” and knowledge of “primitive cultures” to gaze at Greek life, and for seeking after the “pre-Olympian element” in Greek religion. In other words, the reviewer valued Halliday’s work precisely because it had taken up the Ritualists’ banner. (Like all *JHS* reviews of the time, this one was anonymous, although the prose is suggestive



of Harrison herself.) This Ritualist stance undoubtedly was one of the biggest reasons that *Greek Divination* had little effect on the scholarly world. Soon after its publication, interest in the Ritualists' approach began to wane among academics, perhaps in part because it was interrupted by World War I, but also because it was simply running out of steam. After the war, it fell even further out of favor: classicists began to re-embrace a picture of the Greeks as paradigmatically rational, and rejected comparisons between them and the "savage" and "primitive" peoples of whom the Ritualists had been so fond. Magic, which had just begun to gain credit as a serious academic subject before the war, was now set aside as well, to languish until the 1980s (see further on this in Chapter 5, where I return to Halliday's interest in pursuing the connection between divination and magic). Halliday did go on to enjoy a creditable career – he became professor of ancient history at the University of Liverpool – but that career was built largely in the still marginal field of folklore studies, which did not help to bring renewed attention to his first book. In 2003, a small firm, Kessinger Publishing, reprinted *Greek Divination* and reissued many of its individual chapters as pamphlets, but the fact that Kessinger offers these alongside books designed to introduce seekers to Mithraic ritual, works on the astral body, the collected poems of the mystic A.E. Waite, and treatises on ritual magic and demonology by Eliphas Levi has not helped to raise the status of Halliday's book in the academic world.

The next major contribution to the study of divination that appeared after Halliday's book was, like Bouché-Leclercq's four volumes, primarily a compendium of information. Arthur Stanley Pease's excellent commentary on Cicero's *Concerning Divination* (1920/3) copiously collected ancient information about a wide variety of Greek and Roman divinatory techniques. Pease began, moreover, the task of tracing a history of the debates about divination in antiquity. But after Pease, several more decades would elapse before further significant research appeared, and what did appear would continue to be mostly of a documentary rather than a theoretical nature. In 1950 Pierre Amandry published *La mantique apollonienne à Delphes: Essai sur le fonctionnement de l'oracle* and six years later H.W. Parke and D.E.W. Wormell followed with their two-volume *The Delphic Oracle*. Parke continued to contribute studies of institutional oracles with *Greek Oracles* (1967), *The Oracles of Zeus: Dodona, Olympia, Ammon* (1967) and *Oracles of Apollo in Asia Minor* (1985). In 1971, W. Günther contributed *Das Orakel von Didyma in hellenistischer Zeit* and in 1978 Joseph Fontenrose offered his update of Parke and Wormell's work, *The Delphic Oracle: Its Responses and Operations with a Catalogue of Responses*. Although this list is not complete, it gives the tenor of mid-twentieth-century scholarship, which expended a lot of effort on



recovering and organizing both archaeological and textual information, and relatively little on understanding *why* divination was important to ancient cultures – or on asking how it could shed light on the social structures or mentalities of the Greeks and Romans. Notably, moreover, almost all of this work focused on institutional oracles, especially Delphi, rather than technical forms of divination or the figure of the independent diviner. These oracles were frequently mentioned by the Greek tragedians, by Plato, Herodotus, Thucydides and many other “mainstream” authors of Greek antiquity who were understood to help carry the torch of Greek rationality. If work on divination was to be done, this way of doing it fit the mood of the times.

The theoretical and methodological advances that had been made in the study of religions by the time that Jean-Pierre Vernant published his volume in 1974 made it all the more desirable finally to move toward answering questions such as those he had posed. The scholars whom he invited to contribute certainly heeded his call, and, although the amount of work on divination continued to be meager for a long time, those who came later heeded his call as well. Robert Parker’s examination of the Delphic Oracle, for example, took up the question of oracular authority and suggested that the interpretive process that followed an oracle’s delivery often transferred authority from the god who had spoken the oracle to those who received his words (1985). Giovanni Manetti used semiotic theory to approach ancient Greek and Mesopotamian divinatory systems, and in doing so demonstrated that very different divinatory mentalities underlay the two cultures, which in turn reflected the importance of written and oral methods of communication in each of them (1987). In the early 1990s, Polymnia Athanassiadi contributed a series of articles that showed how changes within divinatory practices during late antiquity could be used to help trace larger shifts in religious and civic authority and to pinpoint the areas in which pagan and Christian ideologies clashed. Lisa Maurizio investigated the values that ancient Greece ascribed to women and possessed prophecy by contextualizing the Pythia within information about female possession in other cultures, including those of contemporary Africa (1995). An edited volume brought out by Federica Cordano and Cristiano Grottanelli focused on sortition in the ancient world – a topic that had particularly been neglected up till then; several of the essays, most notably Grottanelli’s, showed how close examination of a divinatory method illuminates the manner in which abstract concepts such as “equality” are understood by a culture (2000). Hugh Bowden’s recent book on Delphi and Athenian democracy (2005) returns, in a sense, to the concerns of Parker’s pioneering article, asking how the oracle affected the emergence of a new form of government. Dream

divination attracted particular attention. To single out only one of a number of works on this topic, Patricia Cox Miller (1994) examined the way in which dreams and their interpretation provided a discourse through which both personal and societal patterns of thought could be articulated.

### *Divination and Magic*

But the one topic on which work still has hardly begun is divination and magic – a surprising situation, given the huge amount of interest in all other aspects of ancient magic that has blossomed during the past three decades, and an ironic situation as well, given that the relationship between magic and divination lay at the very heart of Halliday's early attempt to theorize divination, as we saw, as well as at the heart of most Christian attempts to defame the two pursuits, from late antiquity until well into the early modern period. This puzzling state of affairs brings me to the final part of my brief history of the history of divination. I will pick up the threads by returning to the middle of the twentieth century and looking at what was going on with the study of ancient religion more generally.

In 1941, Martin P. Nilsson published the first volume of his magisterial *Geschichte der griechischen Religion*, which focused on the archaic and classical periods. The third edition of this volume, published in 1967, checks in at 843 pages excluding indices, but very few of these are spared for divination – there is a 27-page sub-chapter on Delphi and another, nine-page sub-chapter on divination more generally, about half of which is spent on Delphi and other institutional oracles. Most of the discussion of Delphi, moreover, focuses not on its divinatory practices *per se*, but rather on the Oracle's potential to steer political matters such as colonization and the tribal divisions of Athens, its role in validating new laws, and its influence on the calendar. That is, for Nilsson, Delphi is of interest primarily as an instance of how (as he sees it) Delphic priests could influence the civic life of Greek *poleis*. Again, Delphi's potential to be fit into the "rational" aspects of Greek life seems to have been attractive to a mid-century scholar. Even more importantly for the present investigation, although Nilsson expresses some admiration for Halliday's book, he revises Halliday's connection between magic and divination to the distinct advantage of the latter. Divination is not an enfeebled form of magic, Nilsson argues, but springs from the inborn tendency of humans to observe and conclude: if something unusual occurs before an important occasion such as the hunt, and the hunt turns out well, the occurrence will be remembered and perhaps elevated to the status of a "sign."

If anything, divination was originally a simple, natural art that was subsequently arrogated by magicians as another means to power. Nilsson otherwise leaves magic almost unmentioned in this first volume. The sort of magic that he does discuss, in a sub-chapter entitled “Zauberriten im Kult,” is limited to things such as “sacred marriage” and rituals to enhance fertility – in other words, this is “magic” in what we would now consider only the loosest sense of the word, and excluding all potentially distressing subjects such as curse tablets and love spells. It seems clear that for Nilsson and his mid-century readers, magic, and most forms of divination, were peripheral to religion as it was practiced by the Greeks.

Nilsson’s second volume, which was published 14 years later, covers the Hellenistic and imperial periods. Here, he shows a somewhat greater interest in both divination and magic – he discusses astrology as well as institutional oracles and ventures briefly even into the curse tablets – but he doesn’t go as far as one might expect, given that scholars of his time believed the imperial age to be the period when such dissolute phenomena began to flourish. The implicit message, again, is that magic and divination are of only tangential relevance to religion that is truly Greek. It fell to the Norwegian scholar Samson Eitrem to treat Greek divination in a smaller, far lesser-known book that was published between Nilsson’s two volumes (*Orakel und Mysterien am Ausgang der Antike*, 1947) and to treat magic in some of his articles, as well as in a manuscript on magic and divination that was left unpublished at his death in 1966. While Nilsson’s two volumes have served for decades as the primary resource for scholars of Greek religion and have never been out of print, Eitrem’s book is seldom cited and is scarcely available even second-hand. In 1997, on the fiftieth anniversary of its publication, Fritz Graf brought it back into the public eye by offering “Magic and Divination” as the first annual Eitrem lecture at the Norwegian Institute at Athens. In 1991, Dirk Obbink translated a small portion of Eitrem’s unpublished book on magic and divination and included it in a collection of essays on magic. Nonetheless, in spite of Obbink’s and Graf’s efforts, subsequent years have seen relatively few publications on the topic that Eitrem had hoped to revive.

Another book that appeared between the first and second volumes of Nilsson’s great history was destined to receive much more attention than Eitrem’s did: E.R. Dodds’s *The Greeks and the Irrational* (1951) is still standard reading for classicists and for many outside of the field as well. In the preface, Dodds cautions that his work is not meant to serve as a “history of Greek religion, or even of Greek religious ideas or feelings . . . It is a study of the successive interpretations which Greek minds placed on one particular type of human experience – a sort of experience in which nineteenth-century rationalism took little interest, but whose

cultural significance is now widely recognized" (n.p.). He never quite specifies exactly what sort of experience he means by this, but the rather self-defensive paragraph that follows, where he justifies his use of recent anthropological and psychological theories, ends with the query, "Why should we attribute to the ancient Greeks an immunity from 'primitive' modes of thought which we do not find in any society open to our direct observation?" In other words, we are to look to the title of his book for the theme that binds together his chapters, such as it is: they are all disquisitions on what he understands to be irrational elements in Greek religion. Several of the chapters touch on divinatory topics; one of the appendices, which had appeared four years earlier as an article in the *Journal of Roman Studies*, takes up theurgy, a form of magic that flourished in late antiquity and the Renaissance.

Dodds, then, was willing to engage with topics that Nilsson and others had largely avoided. And yet the results did not move work on either divination or magic forward as quickly as one might have hoped, for two reasons. One was that *The Greeks and the Irrational* was only the first shot across a very wide bow – for decades, the academy had insisted that the Greeks were consummately rational, and although Dodds's book was praised by reviewers, it would be a while before others began to follow where he had led. (Dodds had spent his earlier career working on Neoplatonism, which inevitably brought him into contact with topics such as dreams, oracles and magic, and had also published an edition and commentary of Euripides' *Bacchae*, which gave him reason to study some of the wilder elements of Dionysiac cult – in other words, he was unusually well prepared for what he did in *The Greeks and the Irrational*. His long-standing interest in contemporary spiritualism undoubtedly helped to prepare him as well.)

The second reason that *The Greeks and the Irrational* was slow to move the ball forward has to do with the specific manner in which Dodds treated divination and magic. About magic I will make only two remarks. First, the fact that his earlier work on theurgy was included as an appendix to the book suggests that Dodds felt the subject was important; he aimed to bring it into wider circulation by putting it side by side with his discussions of archaic and classical Greece. But second, and somewhat at odds with this apparent intention, he presented even theurgy – a highly intellectualized form of magic, developed by Platonic philosophers – as a late and degraded growth upon the formerly healthy body of Greek religion. In a phrase that has repeatedly been quoted since it was printed, Dodds characterized theurgy's sacred texts, the *Chaldean Oracles*, as a "manifesto of irrationalism" and declared that "as vulgar magic is commonly the last resort of the personally desperate, of those whom man and God have

alike failed, so theurgy became the refuge of a despairing intelligentsia which already felt *la fascination de l'abîme*" (1951: 287–8). In other words, even as he turned the spotlight onto this particular type of magic, Dodds reiterated the familiar opinion that magic was degenerate, and could best be studied only as evidence for cultural decline. How many scholars would leap to follow this lead?

He treated divination differently, using it as collateral evidence for exploring one of his book's central topics – the nature of the self in Greek thought. In Chapter 3 he takes up Plato's characterization of enthusiastic prophecy as a form of divine madness. Dodds begins by comparing enthusiasm to spirit possession (more recent scholarship similarly contextualizes it within what we now call "altered states of consciousness") and suggests that this irrational aspect of human behavior can help us understand the Greek idea of the self more generally. At the final turn, however, he pulls us back, and insists that when all is said and done, enthusiasm as we find it at Delphi actually served to guarantee a reassuring normalcy:

Greece had neither a Bible nor a Church; that is why Apollo, vicar on earth of the heavenly father, came to fill the gap. Without Delphi, Greek society could scarcely have endured the tensions to which it was subjected in the Archaic Age. The crushing sense of human ignorance and human insecurity, the dread of divine *phthonos*, the dread of *miasma* – the accumulated burden of these things would have been unendurable without the assurance that behind the seeming chaos there was knowledge and purpose. (1951: 75)

Inspired divination then, when held firmly under the control of a god who was not only a Nietzschean paragon of clarity and light but indeed a sort of sober Anglican cleric, was the very purveyor of rationality. There may be a certain element of truth to this (divination does, after all, tend to be called on in situations of uncertainty, and, as Robert Parker has shown, it can stimulate a more nuanced and focused discussion of an issue than had previously occurred), but Dodds has surely pushed the point too far. His description of enthusiastic prophecy neatly contrasted with the much wilder picture of Dionysian ecstasy that he was to discuss next, but Plato, after all, had categorized *both* the Dionysian and the Apollonian experiences as forms of madness. In Chapter 4, Dodds discusses dreams, which inevitably brings him to the topics of dream divination and dream incubation, and briefly to ancient theories of dream divination. Much of his discussion here is situated within tolerably mainstream thought of the time: Freud's ideas, to which he refers, had gained acceptability, and the dream

as a literary device, which he treats at length, had already been studied by classical scholars.

In the final analysis, the effect that *The Greeks and the Irrational* had on the study of divination and magic was an interesting mix. As a widely praised book, it began to legitimate interest in all kinds of things that earlier generations of classicists had side-stepped. Without Dodds, it is hard to imagine the surge of work on ancient magic that began in the late 1970s and has continued ever since. But the book's effect on divination was apparently different, for divination has not been so quickly resuscitated as a respectable field. Why was this so? Why did divination continue to languish after magic took off?

Two observations can help us here. The first is inspired by the title of Vernant's 1974 collection – *Divination et rationalité*. After World War I, as I have noted, work on divination, such as it was, focused on institutional oracles and tended to emphasize the ways in which these oracles had worked to validate civically and politically important matters. Nilsson felt comfortable relegating most of what he said about magic to a late sub-chapter called “Der niedere Glaube” (“low” or “vulgar” beliefs) but most of what he said about oracles or even astrology was put under chapters entitled “The Religion of the State” or “Personal Beliefs,” and he chose to focus his attention on the role of Delphi's priesthood in putting the Pythia's ramblings to good use. Dodds topped off this trend by making enthusiastic prophecy, as it was practiced at institutional oracles, the standard-bearer of stability and common sense in times of turmoil. Meanwhile, other forms of divination that were less easy to subsume under the umbrella of rationalism as it was understood at the time – sortition, entrails reading, lecanomancy, etc. – by and large were simply ignored.

Magic, in contrast, had continued to be viewed by scholars and non-scholars alike as dark and irrational – as the ultimate foil to religion in a Frazerian or Tylorian sense. Nilsson and Dodds, again, both helped to keep this perception alive. From our backward-looking perspective, then, divination can be seen to have become somewhat of a *tertium quid* in the course of the twentieth century, stranded between rational religion at one end of a spectrum and irrational magic at the other end. Divination was never completely a respectable thing, but certainly it was far more respectable than magic.

Situating divination between magic and religion had surprising consequences for its fate as a field of study. It almost surely made divination a less appealing scholarly topic than magic during the late 1960s and the 1970s precisely because it was perceived to be further away than magic from the unrefined (and thereby, or so ran the argument of the day, the most deeply revealing) desires and beliefs of the ancients. As the western

world grew more aware of rapidly-disappearing non-western cultures, and more aware of its own colonialist effects on those cultures, scholars from many disciplines began to think more closely about the ways in which westerners had portrayed non-western societies. They became more sensitive to the tendency to impose “otherness” upon outsiders, and also to the fact that this tendency existed among the outsiders themselves; it was a nearly universal human trait. Such realizations in turn challenged the normative assumptions underlying both our own categories and those of other peoples. In this atmosphere, magic stood out as a prime candidate for re-examination, for no other category had so often been used, trans-historically and cross-culturally, as a way of distancing outsiders. In contrast, because the practice of divination had never acquired the same dangerously exotic stamp as had magical practices, and because the term “divination” had never acquired as deeply pejorative overtones as those that had prompted attempts to redefine “magic,” it failed to fascinate the same scholars who began to take up the study of magic (as well as the study of other exotically “primitive” phenomena such as initiation rituals, another growth industry of the 1960s and 1970s that hearkened back to the Cambridge Ritualists). In other words, one reason that divination may have failed to become a focus of scholarly interest in the 1970s and 1980s was that it wasn’t a dark enough target; by keeping divination rational, Nilsson, Dodds and others like them unwittingly set it up to become unfashionable.

My second observation follows upon the first. Although sociologists and anthropologists began to develop globalizing theories of magic (and critiques of the same) in the 1960s, anthropological work on divination tended instead to focus on the specifics of particular peoples’ systems. Where theories were offered, they seldom took center stage (instead, focus lay on the data being examined) and scholars seldom applied such theories beyond the culture for which they had first been developed (even E.E. Evans-Pritchard’s immensely popular *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, which theoretically influenced the study of magic for years to come, made little dent in the theoretical study of divination). Thus, even if scholars of antiquity had wished to take a new look at divination, well-developed theories through which they could do so were not easily available – Vernant had to go to some trouble to find the African models that he cited in the introduction to his volume. And, although classicists pioneered theoretical work in the humanities during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (and particularly helped to pioneer work in religion at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries), they have seldom taken the lead in developing new theories since then. In this spirit it is worth remembering that



work on ancient divination never ceased – as I noted above, valuable collections of material were assembled in the middle of the century. It was simply a long time before scholars of antiquity moved on from assembly to evaluation.

With this in mind, we might think again about the work on divination that has more recently begun to appear, some of which was mentioned in the previous section. From where did these more theoretically sophisticated treatments of divination draw their inspiration, and what finally prompted them? The most important answer to the first half of that question is “Vernant” – most of the scholars whom I mentioned earlier cite his work in their notes; clearly, the questions that he posed and the models that he and his contributors provided helped to stimulate these later works (and certainly, they have stimulated my own thoughts in the present book as well). An answer to the second question is that much of the recent work involving divination seems to address, at least as much as it addresses divination, other topics that have enjoyed increased attention in recent years: gender, semiotics, late antiquity, the construction of authority, religion as a social phenomenon. Many of these studies have been immensely valuable and extremely interesting, but divination itself, in its own right, still needs attention.

### *What This Book Will Do*

In short, there is a lot of ground to be made up – more than a single volume can hope to cover. The title of this book already indicates one choice that I made soon after I started writing: what I had intended to be a work on Greek and Roman divination was pared back to Greek divination alone, not only because I realized that the two cultures provided more material than I could present in one book but also because, more importantly, I realized that there were significant differences between the types of divination practiced by the two and between the intellectual and social structures that underlay them. Although I use some Roman sources – most notably Cicero – to supplement the Greek evidence on which I focus, I make no attempt to analyze Roman divination *per se*.

Another early decision involved making a choice between the general and the detailed. I am not by nature a writer of lengthy books, much less of multi-volume *compendia* like that of Bouché-Leclercq. I had to choose, therefore, between either focusing closely on a few selected topics within Greek divination or giving a broader, but less detailed, overview of the whole field. The more I investigated the path that scholarship on divination had taken during the past century – and in particular, as



I became aware that since Bouché-Leclercq, no single work had brought together a representative span of techniques that the Greeks would have called divinatory – the greater seemed the need to provide a general study. Although the ancients had divided divination into “natural” and “technical” types, the division was always somewhat artificial, as the discussion earlier in this chapter has already begun to show: institutional oracles often offered what were usually categorized as “technical” methods, such as lot divination and empyromancy, alongside enthusiastic prophecy, and even dreams – a “natural” method – often required skilled interpretation by humans trained in particular techniques. Until we begin to think of divination as an ontologically unified category (however blurry some of its exterior borders may be), we will risk misrepresenting and therefore misunderstanding its function and meaning in the ancient world.

Having said that, however, I must admit that I found it impossible to organize my material without making some divisions within the category of divination. To me, it seemed heuristically more valuable to do so not under the rubrics of “natural” and “technical” but those of “institutional oracles” and “independent diviners.” Certainly, there were overlaps between oracles and diviners as well, as we will see (each borrowed from the other those methods or claims that had proven profitable, and each could, on occasion, validate itself by referring to the other, as when an incubation oracle in Daunia claimed to have been founded by the mythic seer Calchas), but at least one significant difference does distinguish them. Whereas many oracles loomed large on the ancient landscape as panhellenically famous, long-established places, most independent diviners were known exclusively by those who dwelt in the same town as they did, or by those through whose towns they wandered, plying their talents; whatever panhellenic fame they could claim came from affiliating themselves with other people – with guilds of diviners such as the Melampids, the Telliadae or the Iamids (who in turn traced their lineages to famous diviners of myth). Because of these and other differences between oracles and diviners, the questions we ask about each type will vary – what do myths say about the nature of the *places* where oracles are located, for example? And what does myth say about the nature of the *people* who are diviners? How does a *place* validate itself as opposed to a *person*? How is each embedded in the surrounding social and cultural fabric?

The rest of this book, therefore, is divided in half. Chapters 2 and 3 focus on institutional oracles, starting with Delphi and Dodona and then moving on to Claros, Didyma and some others. Chapters 4 and 5 treat independent diviners (*manteis*), with Chapter 4 offering an overview of the diviner mostly as we know him in archaic, classical and Hellenistic

sources and Chapter 5 focusing on a type of *mantis* whom we often call a magician – one of the experts who, during the imperial period, composed the extensive collections of spells known now as the magical papyri. Many of these spells are divinatory in nature, and they provide detailed information on how divinatory procedures might be carried out by an independent specialist. This last chapter also provides an opportunity to return to the question that Halliday began to pose, but that received so little attention afterwards: why are magic and divination so often mentioned in the same breath?

Throughout all of these chapters, I have often thought of the challenges that Jean-Pierre Vernant posed in 1974; I have tried to situate divinatory procedures within the social, political and cultural *milieux* in which they were used, and to use them to shed light on the mentalities that employed them. I am, however, primarily a scholar of religion and myth; my attention therefore has been most strongly drawn to the tantalizing puzzles that our evidence presents concerning what was done during divinatory procedures and how those actions were rationalized; and concerning what was said about divination's origins and the gods who enabled it to function. My focus on divination as a religious phenomenon is, I hope, another step forward. In league with some of the recent scholars whom I cited earlier in this chapter (or whom I cite in chapters yet to come), I want to erase the erroneous impression, given by Nilsson and others, that divination stands only at the margins of Greek religion. It was central, and must be studied as such.

I have written this book with both scholars and general readers in mind. In hopes that the latter will find it welcoming, I have avoided the sometimes daunting panoply of footnotes; to serve the former, I have included the most important references to ancient sources and modern treatments parenthetically in the text (although not necessarily all of them where there are many; the bibliography at the end of each chapter should be consulted by scholars who wish to go further with a specific question). The bibliographies are subdivided according to the divisions within each chapter; works that are relevant to more than one division are listed under "General" at the top of each bibliography.

Most abbreviated titles of ancient works should be clear even to the non-specialist, but a few are clarified in the list on pages xi–xii. Ancient authors from whom only one work remains are usually cited by name alone (e.g., "Herodotus," "Pausanias"), but fuller citations for these are included in the list of abbreviations as well. I have used a Latinized method of transliteration for names of people and places (e.g., "Branchus") unless they are well known under the Greek transliteration. I have used a Greek method for most other Greek words although I have made occasional exceptions for

words that will look more familiar to the non-specialist under a Latinate form.

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## CHAPTER 2

# *The Divine Experience*

## *Part One: Delphi and Dodona*



The scene, as many people have imagined it, is somewhat strange. A virgin, robed in white, enters a darkened room at the back of a temple. She sits on a tripod, which is positioned over a chasm in the earth. From the chasm pour forth intoxicating vapors, and as they fill her body, she becomes possessed by Apollo. She speaks for the god in an incoherent voice, and her gibbering message is translated by priests into poetic verse that enquirers will be able to understand.

Such is the popular picture of the Pythia, a woman who was responsible for conveying Apollo's words to people at the Delphic Oracle. As it stands, the picture prompts questions: why should the god choose a girl to convey his words of advice? Why should he cause her to babble rather than speak clearly? And why, being a god, should he manifest himself as subterranean gases? As this chapter will show, not everything in the popular portrait matches the ancient evidence. But it is nonetheless a good place to start because it emphasizes something that is true of several oracles that we will discuss in this chapter and the next: they relied on mortals through whom a god was believed to speak. In common parlance, the god possessed these people; human and divine came more closely together than at any other time.

There were also oracles that did not involve possession, but even then, they offered close encounters with the divine – in some cases even closer than those at Delphi as far as the person seeking advice was concerned. At Delphi, the enquirer posed his question and waited for Apollo to respond through the Pythia. But at “incubation” oracles, enquirers slept in gods' sanctuaries, waiting for gods to appear personally in their dreams and give them advice directly. Equally close – and surely more frightening – were the encounters imagined to take place at *nekuomanteia*, oracles of the dead. At these places, ghosts supposedly rose up from the

Underworld to answer questions. Even if these *nekuomanteia* never actually existed (a question to which I will return at the end of Chapter 3), the stories about them again emphasize the directness with which humans expected to interact with otherworldly entities at special places set aside as oracles.

### *Location*

Before I go further into the matter of close contact, however, we should pause on that phrase “places set aside as oracles.” This points to another important characteristic that most ancient oracles shared: each was anchored to a specific place. Usually, there was a myth that told of how such a place was discovered, and what made each of them good for oracular activity. (Sometimes, there were several different myths for a single place.) The myths help to reveal what was special about the oracle – what cultural and religious values it promoted and what concepts of communication it made use of.

But more generally, the fact that each oracle was tied to a location sets them in contrast with the independent diviners (*manteis*) on whom Chapters 4 and 5 focus. These diviners might live in a single city for their whole lives or they might wander from place to place, but either way, even if they claimed to have been inspired by Apollo or another god, they had no permanent affiliation with any particular temple or sanctuary. Not surprisingly, there was some competition between oracles and independent diviners. Typically, the oracles won out; already for Plato there was more prestige attached to information that came from Delphi or Dodona than to information that came from the mouths of men and women working on their own. In part, this was because the places where oracles were located had their own sorts of charisma. Some of them – particularly Delphi – were situated in breathtaking landscapes. Some of them were in remote places, which gave them the authority that often accompanies the marginal and the exotic. Considering the limited means of transportation available in antiquity, location in itself could lend gravity to the act of making an enquiry (Plato, *Phaedrus* 244b–d).

The importance of place was emphasized in various ways by those who administered the oracles. At Didyma, for example, Apollo’s sanctuary claimed that the sacred grove in the temple area was the very one in which Apollo had met and fallen in love with Branchus, who served as the Oracle’s first prophet. Another myth said that special ash trees in the forest surrounding the Oracle at Claros kept away all noxious creatures,

making the region into a sort of paradise. The Amphiareion claimed to have been built on the very spot where the Amphiaraus had been swallowed up by the earth, along with his chariot, horses and charioteer. Delphi represented itself as being at the exact center of the world, and displayed the *omphalos*, or navel-stone, that Zeus had once placed there to honor this fact – and Delphi also had the mysterious chasm from which prophetic fumes arose (Didyma: Callimachus fr. 229; Claros: Nicander fr. 31 and Graf 1993; Delphi: e.g., Pindar fr. 54; on the *omphalos*, see the interesting recent discussion of Bassi).

Of course, local inhabitants had every reason to enhance their oracles' reputations because oracles could be a considerable source of income. When, toward the end of the Homeric *Hymn to Apollo*, the first Delphic priests ask the god how they are to make a living in the desolate spot that he has chosen for his oracle, Apollo replies that if each of them stands with a sacrificial knife in his right hand, he will have plenty of meat to fill his stomach. This refers proleptically to the fact that each visitor to Delphi had to provide a sheep for sacrifice before consulting the god, from which the priests received a choice cut of meat. The *Hymn* was composed during the early sixth century BCE; later authors portrayed early Delphic priests as having been in the habit of literally snatching the best cuts off the altar before anyone else had a chance. Myth said that this boorish practice caused both Aesop and Neoptolemus to quarrel with the priests, and to die under the knife themselves. Such stories may be completely fictional (certainly, the priests weren't snatching meat in later periods), but their greed nonetheless became proverbial (*Oxyrhynchus Papyrus* 1800 fr. 2; Pindar, *Nemean* 7.41–3; Macarius 3.22 = *Paroem. Gr.* II, 154).

Other oracular shrines also made sure their personnel were well fed. At the Amphiareion, for example, priests received one shoulder of meat and the hide from each animal that was sacrificed; the meat was eaten and the hides were probably sold to tanners at a nice profit, as was the case at most sanctuaries. Nor was it only priests who made out well. Because the process of consultation at many oracles might consume days or even weeks, local hotels and taverns had a steady trade in housing and feeding visitors. Those who sold the animals to be sacrificed and merchants who sold small objects for people to dedicate to the god benefited, too.

Many oracles eventually became the centers of much larger "entertainment" complexes, in fact. Those dedicated to Amphiaraus, Delphic Apollo and Dodonian Zeus sponsored athletic games; Didyma probably did so as well, judging from the remains of a stadium on the site. Games like these attracted competitors and spectators from around the world;



the Pythian Games, held every four years at Delphi, rivaled the Olympics in prestige. Most oracular sanctuaries also had theaters that could hold hundreds or thousands of people – the capacity of the one at Dodona is estimated at between 17,000 and 20,000.

In other words, visiting a major oracle was a bit like visiting the Vatican; you might go in order to have an audience with the pope, but while you were waiting, there was plenty of other stuff to see and do. And, just as with the Vatican, some people who went to oracles had no intention of consulting the god – they came as athletes, as fans of the athletes or simply as tourists. Delphi displayed itself particularly well: the sacred way that led from the bottom of the hill to the temple itself was lined with buildings, statues and monuments that had been erected by cities to advertise their wealth, splendor and achievements, or by individuals to celebrate a victory in the games (Figs. 2 and 3). When visitors finally reached the temple, they saw paintings of famous mythological scenes. A young woman in Euripides' *Ion*, visiting Delphi for the first time, says:

Look, look at this: Zeus' son  
is killing the Lernaean Hydra  
With a golden sickle . . .  
And look at this one.  
On a horse with wings,  
Bellerophon is killing the mighty three-bodied  
Fire-breathing monster.  
My eyes dart everywhere.

A nearby building, dedicated by the people of Cnidus, included elaborate paintings of the Trojan War and Odysseus' journey to the Underworld, all of which could be explained by a guide if you had the price (Euripides, *Ion* 189–92 and 201–5; Pausanias 10.25.1–10.31.12; compare Plutarch, *Oracles* 395a–b). In short, if people came to an oracle hoping to experience a close encounter with the divine, they achieved it only after encountering plenty of humans as well. Most ancient oracles did not provide the sorts of mystical experiences that happen while one sits alone on a mountain peak or in a desert.

In this and the next chapter, I will reconstruct as far as possible what sort of divine encounter each of several oracles offered – how they worked and what place they held in the imaginations of their clients. This chapter will focus closely on Delphi, the oracle about which we have the best information. The picture of Delphi can then serve as a backdrop for examinations of, first, Dodona in this chapter and, then, several other oracles in Chapter 3.

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*Figure 2* Site plan of Delphi showing the numerous buildings lining the road to the Oracle, dedicated by individuals and cities. Based on that of P. de la Coste-Messelière, *Au musée de Delphes* (Paris 1936) pl. 50

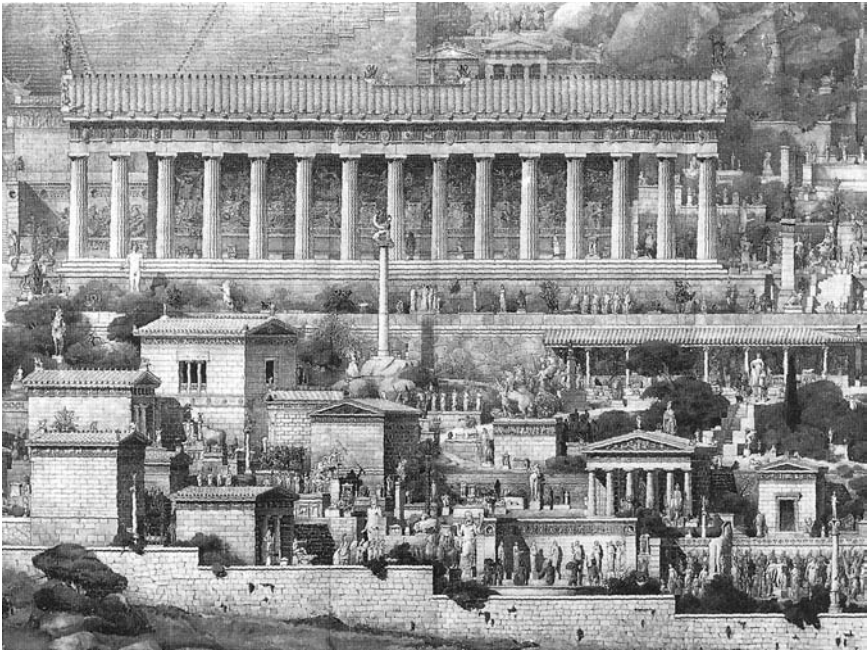


Figure 3 Old French archaeological reconstruction of Delphic sanctuary

### *Delphi*

The Delphic Oracle was situated in a rugged, mountainous area off the northern coast of the Gulf of Corinth, about 90 miles northwest of Athens as the crow flies. Nearby was the port of Crisa, which made access to the Oracle fairly easy for visitors who came by sea, although they still had to hike part way up Mount Parnassus, upon which the Oracle had been built – the illustration on the cover of this book gives some impression of how steep that walk would have been, as does the drawing in Figure 3. Archaeological remains tell us that the sanctuary existed by the late ninth century BCE, but they cannot tell us when the Oracle itself first appeared – the sanctuary may have existed for quite some time without it. The *Odyssey* is the first text to mention the Oracle, which takes us perhaps to the early seventh century (8.79–82). This is also approximately the time that a new temple was built on the site. The Pythian Games were up and running by the early sixth century, and at about the same time, the Homeric *Hymn to Apollo* provided an elaborate story of the Oracle's foundation.

Together, the games and the *Hymn* suggest that the sanctuary and Oracle were attaining panhellenic status at that time.

Notably, neither the *Odyssey* nor the Homeric *Hymn* says anything about the Pythia. The poet of the *Odyssey* mentions the Oracle so briefly as to preclude detail, but her absence from the *Hymn* is striking. This might mean that her role at the Oracle was a later development – perhaps the mode of divination changed as time went on (this was the case at Didyma and there is some reason to think this was the case at Dodona, as we'll see). But it could also mean that the poet simply didn't find the Pythia important: thematically, the task of the *Hymn* was to praise Apollo; the point was not *how* he communicated with mortals but rather that he communicated at all. In the mid-sixth century there is finally a reference to what looks like the Pythia by the poet Theognis, who mentions a "priestess" speaking forth from the rich shrine of Pytho (*Elegy* I.805–10). This doesn't tell us much; building a more complete picture of her requires us to put together pieces collected from numerous later sources.

Our most useful informant is Plutarch, who had actually served as a priest at the sanctuary. One of his essays presents a fictionalized discussion among his friends about why recent Pythias had begun to speak in prose rather than giving oracles in poetic verse, as they supposedly had in the past. A character named Theon comments on the sort of woman the current Pythia is and, more generally, the sort of woman that all Pythias should be:

She who serves the god here at Delphi was born of a lawful and honorable marriage . . . and her life has been well ordered in all respects. But, because she grew up in the home of poor farmers, she carries with her nothing in the way of skill or expertise or ability when she goes down into the oracular shrine. On the contrary, just as Xenophon says that a bride should have seen and heard as little as possible before she goes to her husband's household, so also the Pythia goes to the god being inexperienced, unlearned about almost everything and truly virginal with respect to her soul. (*Oracles* 405c–d)

The passage is full of interesting implications. First, there is the phrase "virginal with respect to her soul." How are we to understand this? Other phrases in the passage suggest that it means she is uncorrupted by sophisticated ideas from the outside world. Starting with a person who was as free from outside influences as possible – and then, we must presume, taking care to ensure that she remained so – would help to guarantee that enquirers would be getting Apollo's words, free of human static. I will return to this.

*Apollo's bride*

But it's hard to ignore the possible sexual connotations of Theon's phrase as well. Should we understand her as Apollo's "wife," and thus understand the prophetic process during which she was "filled by Apollo" as a form of sexual intercourse that led to a "verbal pregnancy"? The early Christians chose to do so. John Chrysostom, a bishop of the fourth and fifth centuries CE, said to his congregation: "The Pythia is a woman who sits on Apollo's tripod, spreading her legs. When the evil spirit rises from below and slips through her genitals, she is filled with madness. Letting down her hair, she raves about the future and foams at the mouth" (*Homilies on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* 29.12.1). He followed this description with the remark "I know that you must be embarrassed and blushing to hear these things" (one wonders who was in his congregation and whether he correctly estimated their reactions). Another Christian, Origen, was appalled at the thought that any god would enter a woman through the part of her body that "a decent man would be ashamed to look at, much less touch" (*Against Celsus* 7.3–4).

Of course, the Christians wanted to discredit pagan religions, and their favorite way of doing so was to suggest that they were really nothing more than orgies, with the gods joining in on occasion. But sometimes it turns out that their lurid pictures are built around a core of reality, however much exaggerated. Theon's comparison of the Pythia to a bride is one of the most obvious things they could have seized on to sexualize the Pythia, but other ancient authors make remarks that would have fueled the fire as well. Some describe Apollo as entering the Pythia's *kolpos*, for example. The essential meaning of *kolpos* is "something that enfolds." Anatomically, it could be used to refer either to the bosom or to the female genitals. "Bosom" is probably what the pagan authors intended, given that a common ancient concept of prophecy connected it with a "breath" that was sent from the gods into the chest of the prophet, but the Christians undoubtedly preferred the other meaning.

Diodorus Siculus, writing about a century and a half earlier than Plutarch, tells a story that takes us a little further:

They say that in ancient times, virgins prophesied . . . more recently, however, Echebrates the Thessalian came to the Oracle and saw the virgin who spoke the oracles; he fell in love with her because she was beautiful, kidnapped her and raped her. Because of this terrible thing, the Delphians decreed that it should no longer be a virgin who prophesied but rather an old woman of fifty years, adorned in virginal clothing in memory of the former prophetesses. (16.26.6)

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*Figure 4* A white-haired Pythia runs away in terror as Orestes clutches the *omphalos*. Apollo stands to the left of center; an Erinys (Fury) is at the far left. Artemis and her dogs are at the right. The vase illustrates a scene from Aeschylus' *Eumenides*. Drawing from A. Furtwängler and K. Reichhold, *Griechische Vasenmalerei* (1904–32) pl. 179, based on an early Apulian volute-krater, now in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale Naples

Diodorus' story is meant to explain a change in cult practice. We know that even before his time, however, the Pythia might be an old woman: Aeschylus, writing in the middle of the fifth century BCE, has a Pythia describe herself as old (*Eumenides* 38), and a vase painting from the fourth century shows a Pythia with white hair; the vase likely depicts a scene from Aeschylus' play itself, but it nonetheless confirms the idea (Fig. 4). Since Pythias served for life, the existence of older Pythias is to be expected: even if one were drafted into service as a girl, she would eventually age. Diodorus' point, then, is probably that the change involved the age at which a Pythia *first* took office. This may be confirmed (although for a later period) by an inscription from Delphi, dated between 175 and 225 CE, in which a man mentions that his grandmother had served as Pythia; surely she wasn't serving during the time that she was bearing and raising children, but only afterwards (*FD* III 1: 553).

Given that older women served as Pythias, are we to conclude – and did the early Christians conclude – that Apollo enjoyed making love to women who, by ancient standards, were far beyond their best years? If a geriatric Pythia was intended to kill desire among men like Echeocrates, would Apollo nonetheless be expected to find her appealing? If not, how else might the Pythia's virginal status be understood?

Two observations will point to another interpretation. The first is that celibacy was a prerequisite for many Greek and Roman rituals. This was not because engaging in sex was understood as an act of "infidelity" to the god for whom the ritual would be performed, but because sex – like defecation, urination and most other natural processes – was understood to pollute the body, and human bodies had to be pure when they interacted with gods.

Most often, a person who was about to serve a god would be required to remain celibate only briefly – for a few days before performing the ritual, for example. But in cases where contact was expected to be closer – when a person was expected to actually receive a god into her body, for example – we can imagine that purity had to be as close to perfect as possible. The best way to accomplish this would have been to forbid the Pythia from engaging in sex at all during her term of office. Choosing a young virgin would work well, as long as one could protect her the rest of her life, but choosing someone who was postmenopausal and therefore unattractive (at least in the eyes of ancient Greek men) would work, too. Our two reports about the Pythia's age at appointment (Plutarch's and Diodorus') converge on this single point, then – the Pythia had to be free of bodily pollution and therefore had to be celibate. Neither tradition implies a sexual relationship with Apollo.

The myth of Cassandra is interesting in this respect. According to the most familiar version of the myth, Cassandra acquired the gift of enthusiastic prophecy by agreeing to surrender her virginity to Apollo, but having received it, she reneged on her part of the bargain. Apollo cursed Cassandra so that her prophecies, although accurate, would never be believed by those who heard them (e.g., Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1200–12).

When scholars interpret this story, they tend to focus on the promised sexual encounter – that is, to read the tale as proof that Apollo's filling of the Pythia (or any other woman) with prophetic ability was understood as a sort of insemination – an insemination that in Cassandra's case was never completed. But the story actually says something quite different: Cassandra receives prophetic ability while still a virgin and retains it in spite of her continuing virginity; what she loses is her credibility. Similarly, myth said that the laurel (*daphnē*), a plant closely associated with Apollonian



enthusiastic prophecy (the Pythia holds a laurel branch and wears a laurel wreath; we'll see other close connections between the laurel and Apollonian prophecy in later chapters), was the transformed body of a virgin (Daphne) whom Apollo desired but failed to win. In each case, myth simultaneously presents a girl as the privileged object of Apollo's attention and as being exceptionally committed to celibacy; that this celibacy implies exceptional purity, too, is particularly well marked in Daphne's myth because the laurel was also used in Apollonian purification processes. In each case, myth "explains" the contradiction inherent in the combination of privileged attention and celibacy by presenting Apollo (who like most gods, typically had his way with whomever he desired) as a failed lover, but real divinatory practices spun the combination differently: to be "desired" by Apollo, that is, to be considered an adequate receptacle of his divinatory force, the Pythia had to be pure and therefore had to be celibate.

My second observation takes us back to Theon's comparison of the Pythia to the perfect bride as described by Xenophon. In the context of Plutarch's essay, the comparison is meant to answer a specific question that had been raised earlier: why can't contemporary Pythias prophesy in verse, as earlier ones had? One part of Theon's comments, "because she grew up in the home of poor farmers, [the Pythia] carries with her nothing in the way of skill or expertise or ability," is meant to explain this deficit: the current Pythia knows nothing about poetry and so cannot compose verse.

But another part of his comments, which describe the ideal Pythia as "inexperienced, unlearned about almost everything and truly virginal with respect to her soul," takes us beyond the immediate question. In the famous essay by Xenophon from which Theon takes his cue (the *Oeconomicus*), the ideal wife is described as someone who is intelligent but highly malleable, someone whom a husband could mold into exactly the sort of partner he wished to have. This meant that the bride should arrive in her new household with as few ideas of her own as possible, since these might interfere with her husband's plans for her. Similarly, by extension, if the Pythia were expected to relay Apollo's statements unadulterated, she had to be free of opinions of her own. Later authors argued that children made good prophets for the same reason: they are simple, straightforward and artless (Iamblichus, *Mysteries* 3.24 and Olympiodorus, *Commentary on Plato's Alcibiades*, p. 8 Cr.). In other words, it is not only the *sexual* inexperience of a given woman that makes her a desirable Pythia because it makes her pure, but additionally her inexperience of the world more broadly. This is why a poor girl, raised apart from other people, would be even more suitable than other virgins.



We might wonder how a woman who took office only in her older years, perhaps after being married, raising children and running a household, could be regarded as free from outside influences. Part of the answer is that, even after they were married, Greek women had relatively little contact with men outside of their family. Once widowed, a woman moved into the home of her son, brother or some other male relative, where this pattern continued. In short, properly behaved women – properly controlled women – were assumed to be relatively free from the extra-familial contacts that might shape their ideas and thereby ruin their ability to be good transmitters of Apollo's words. The fact that a few Pythias were accused of accepting bribes in return for delivering altered messages of political importance underscores the gravity of these considerations (Herodotus 5.63 and 90–1; 6.66, 75, and 122; cf. Ephorus *FGrH* 70 f 119 = Strabo 9.2.4, which tells about a Dodonian prophetess who was accused of altering a response).

But another, and probably more important, part of the answer is to remember that there is often a gap between discourse and reality. The gap is bridged by what J.Z. Smith has called the “institutional wink” that acknowledges the difference between what a ritual pretends to enact and what it actually enacts – a wink that allows participants to carry on nonetheless (Smith 1987). The *ideal* Pythia was like the perfect bride insofar as she was both completely free from the pollution of sexual contact and free from too many ideas; even if it was not always possible to achieve this state of purity in reality, the insistent *characterization* of the Pythia in these terms was the wink that allowed the cult to continue.

### *Experience and mechanics*

If it wasn't sex with Apollo that made the Pythia prophesy, what did do the trick? This question needs to be broken into two others: what did the ancients think happened, and what do *we* think happened? The first question, in turn, needs to be divided in half once again: what did the ancients think happened to the Pythia (what did they think she experienced), and *how* did they think it happened (what were the mechanics)?

Experientially speaking, there was little doubt in antiquity that Apollo spoke from within the Pythia; after all, this was why Apollo's oracles were always delivered in the first person singular, even though they came out of the Pythia's mouth. Occasionally, as we'll see, intellectuals objected that this was below Apollo's dignity, but they were in the minority.

The words used to describe the process literally said that Apollo filled the Pythia (*empimplēmi*), was inside of her (*enthousazō*) or held her (*katechō*). One could argue that two different concepts lurk behind these

words. In the first (*empimplēmi*, *enthousazō*), Apollo possesses the Pythia from the inside out. Fritz Graf (forthcoming) calls this the “Invasion of the Body Snatchers” paradigm of enthusiastic prophecy. In the second (*katechō*), Apollo takes hold of and controls her from the outside – this is what Graf calls the “Brave New World” paradigm. But in practice, the ancients made little distinction between the two processes that Graf distinguishes – indeed, they were able to use *enthousazō* and *katechō* in the same breath to describe a single encounter between mortal and divine (e.g., Plato, *Ion* 533e). The collapse of the two isn’t surprising, given that a god is by definition a force from outside the human realm, who remains separate from the mortal whom he or she possesses even once inside of her body. The lines blurred linguistically as well: just as for us the word “possess” can refer both to the physical act of holding on to something and to a demon’s internal invasion of a human body, so also the Greek word *katechō* could mean both “hold,” in the sense of “holding back” something such a horse, and also “occupy” from within, in the sense of a god “occupying a sanctuary.” From here it would be an easy step to *katechō* coming to mean “possess” in the spiritual sense.

So much for what the ancients imagined the Pythia to experience. We’re still left with the question of how they thought it happened – the mechanics. The most common explanation, which we find in both popular legends and intellectual debates, involved something rising from a chasm in the ground beneath Apollo’s temple. Modern discussions often refer to this as “gas,” but this is shorthand for a variety of ancient words, each of which has its own nuance: *pneuma* (spirit or breath), *atmos* (vapor), *rheuma* (stream), *euōdia*, (fragrance) and *anathumiama* (exhalation), for example. According to legend, this substance was discovered accidentally, either by wandering goatherds or by the goats themselves, who leaned over the chasm, took a deep breath and began to leap around. The humans who inhaled the substance realized they could prophesy under its influence and constructed the Delphic sanctuary on top of it. Because people noticed that the substance could have deleterious effects (sometimes people even leapt into the chasm while intoxicated), it was decided that just one woman would be appointed to do the inhaling and that she would do so from a special seat (the tripod) that would allow her to perch over the chasm without falling in (Plutarch, *Obsolescence* 433c–d; Diodorus Siculus 16.26.1–6).

Is Apollo the substance itself? Is the substance Apollo’s breath (*pneuma*)? Is the substance simply the lovely fragrance (*euōdia*) that is always present when the gods are near? Most ancient people were silent when it came to specifics – not because they couldn’t generate opinions but because they’d never bothered to; the issue didn’t interest them

much. There was a connection between the Pythia coming into contact with the substance and the Pythia becoming possessed and they were satisfied to leave it at that.

The two groups who troubled themselves the most with the issue were the Christians and the pagan intellectuals. The Christians did so because presenting Apollo as an evil spirit (*pneuma ponēron*) who literally entered the Pythia in the form of infernal gas was excellent grist for their anti-pagan mills (we have already seen what John Chrysostom was able to make of the idea in the previous section). The intellectuals did so because they cared about such things as the nature of divinity, and any time a god interacted with the physical world, there arose tricky questions about what distinguished divine nature from the corporality in which humans were mired, and how the two could ever interact.

The intellectuals tried to deal with this problem in several ways; the friends who participate in Plutarch's fictional dialogues are our best witnesses for the main lines of the various arguments that go further back. According to one, Apollo never actually entered the Pythia; rather, he imparted movement to her soul, which already had a movement of its own. The two movements combined into a sort of whirlwind, from which the prophecy emerged (*Oracles* 404e–f). This theory didn't explicitly mention the substance that was said to rise from the Delphic earth, but it didn't eliminate it, either.

Another theory held that although prophecy, like many other good things, was sent by the gods, the gods used intermediaries – *daimones* – to convey these things to humans and thus the gods were able to maintain their distance from us. It was a *daimon* who interacted with the Pythia, not Apollo, and it was *daimones* who did the work at other oracles as well (*Obsolescence* 415a ff.). Mechanically, this deputation worked (so the argument ran) because *daimones* were really just disembodied souls. When one of them encountered the soul of the Pythia, the two souls mingled and information was passed from one to the other (*Obsolescence* 431c–432c). Implicit is the assumption that even if Apollo didn't enter the Pythia, a *daimon* acting on Apollo's behalf did; it retains the idea of possession, then, but keeps Apollo pure. This theory usually makes no specific mention of the chasm and the substance believed to pour out of it, however.

A third theory explicitly brings the substance back into the debate, although it leaves out the gods. The earth itself sends forth streams of all kinds of "potencies." Prophecy is one of these – indeed, it is the "most divine and holy" of all potencies, and the ground around Delphi has a particularly generous share of it – this is the substance that emerges from the chasm. When this prophetic potency mixes with the Pythia's body, it opens up

channels through which her soul can receive impressions of the future (*Obsolescence* 432d–434b).

The character Lamprias (named after Plutarch's brother) combines the second and third theories. He suggests that several agents are involved in the prophetic process, each of which contributes in a different way. The gods are the ultimate source of prophecy just as they are the source of everything else in the world. The earth is the physical source of exhalations that cause prophecy to enter the human soul. The *daimones* are overseers who continually tinker with the process through which the gift of the gods is conveyed by the earth's exhalations, keeping everything in working order. Lamprias, thus, manages to do the seemingly impossible: he keeps the gods involved in prophecy and yet keeps them out of the mortal body; he keeps the chasm and its vapors central to Delphic prophecy and then he explains how these two components work together (*Obsolescence* 436d–437c).

One more theory: Iamblichus, a philosopher and devout defender of divination writing in the third century CE, proposed that divinity is light – literally. This light transcendentally exists above the material world in which humans dwell and never mixes with it directly, but it does emit its energy (which is also manifested as light) into the material world. Similarly, Iamblichus analogizes, the sun exists apart from the earth but emits light that reaches us. When the Pythia or any other enthusiastic medium properly prepares herself for divinity's arrival by performing the correct rituals – either by receiving into herself the spirit (*pneuma*) that rises up from the chasm or by sitting on her special seat within the temple – then the divinity, in the form of divine light, descends and “illuminates” her. While illuminated, she is wholly possessed by the divinity and thus able to prophesy, and yet, as Iamblichus emphasized, the divinity always remains separate from her (*Mysteries* 3.11). In other words, Iamblichus retains an important traditional part of Delphic belief – the substance that rises from the chasm – but instead of treating it as the *cause* of prophecy he treats it as something that is able to *trigger* a prophetic state. In proposing this, Iamblichus comes remarkably close to a modern explanation that I will examine in the next section.

### *Science to the rescue?*

What really did happen to the Pythia, then? If we are unwilling to accept ancient explanations that require the involvement of gods and *daimones* in various ways, what can we turn to? Twenty years ago, we wouldn't have been able to give an answer, unless we were willing to fall back on imaginative suggestions that portrayed the Pythia as smoking hemp,

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*Figure 5* Drawing of the Delphic sanctuary, showing the major fault lines intersecting beneath the *aduton*. Copyright David Fierstein 2003 ([www.davidiad.com](http://www.davidiad.com))

chewing the leaves of Apollo's sacred laurel tree or simply shamming with the connivance of Apollo's priests. The explanation that the ancients had so adamantly insisted on – the subterranean gas or vapor – had been rejected in the early twentieth century after archaeologists showed that there was no chasm or cleft in the bedrock under Apollo's temple and thus, apparently, no way for any substance to have ever wafted forth.

But scholarship is full of surprises. During the final years of the twentieth century, a geologist named J.Z. de Boer, surveying active fault lines in Greece on behalf of the United Nations, discovered one running under the site of the Oracle. De Boer teamed up with an archaeologist, John Hale, to investigate the significance of this fault line further; together they found a second fault line that intersected with the first one directly under the *aduton*, the small room at the back of the temple where the Pythia sat on her tripod (Fig. 5). They then consulted a chemist, Jeffrey Chanton, who showed that trace amounts of three gases – ethylene, ethane (a product of decomposing ethylene) and methane – rose up through fissures in the bedrock and through the waters in springs that were in or near the sanctuary. Henry Spiller, a toxicologist with expertise in hallucinatory gases, joined the group and noted that small doses of ethylene produce

an altered state of consciousness during which people feel euphoria and have out-of-body experiences, but remain lucid enough to answer questions (Hale et al. 2003; de Boer et al. 2001).

Ethylene has a sweet smell, which recalls a remark made by Plutarch about the exquisite fragrance that wafted out of the *aduton* and into the outer chamber when consultations were in session (*Obsolescence* 437c; compare Pindar's description of the *aduton* as sweet-smelling at *Olympian* 7.32). Notably as well, large doses of ethylene lead to frenzied reactions in which people thrash around and cry out. This aligns with Plutarch's famous report of a divinatory session gone wrong, after which the Pythia died – she had been forced to enter the *aduton* in spite of her protests that the time was not right (*Obsolescence* 438b).

Should we just assume, then, that the Pythia inhaled ethylene and fantasized that Apollo was possessing her? It is a temptingly rational explanation, but several problems remain. If the level of gas were high enough to induce an altered state in the Pythia, what would have kept everyone else in the temple from getting high at the same time? We know that priests and consultants sat in the outer chamber where, according to Plutarch, the substance could be smelled. Another problem involves fluctuations in the level of the gas. De Boer and his colleagues postulate that the gas would have increased and decreased periodically, as the ground shifted and caused movement along the fault lines. On the one hand, this nicely addresses Plutarch's observations that there were fluctuations in the substance that rose from the chasm and that there had been times when the Oracle didn't work as well as at others, but on the other hand, it implies that there might not always have been enough ethylene in the *aduton* to send the Pythia into a physiologically altered state (*Obsolescence* 437c).

The best solution to these quandaries is to assume that for most of the Oracle's history, there were only traces of ethylene in the *aduton* – enough to emit a sweet smell but not enough, in itself, to cause an altered state of consciousness. Graf has suggested that the smell would have acted, instead, as a trigger that sent the Pythia into a psychologically altered state, just as various other things can trigger hypnotic or trance-like states in modern practice – the swinging pendulum of a pocket watch being the clichéd example (Graf forthcoming). Studies of altered states of consciousness in other cultures provide comparable examples of sounds, smells or movements acting as triggers for states that are identified as possession. In other words, Iamblichus may not have been far off the mark when he suggested that the *pneuma* coming out of the chasm *prepared* the Pythia to receive divine prophecy rather than *caused* the prophecy itself. Cicero had already noted that enthusiastic states could be brought on by

“the sight of some object, or by the deep tones of a voice, or by singing” (*Divination* 1.80).

In fact, the ethylene trigger may have been just the end of a much longer process that psychologically disposed the Pythia to feel Apollo’s presence. We know that, just after dawn on the seventh of each month, except during the three winter months when Apollo was believed to be away from Delphi, she purified her body by bathing in a nearby spring called Castalia and then by fumigating herself with burning laurel leaves and barley meal at the temple’s hearth. She dressed in clean white clothing. She wore a laurel crown and held a laurel branch. She perhaps drank water from another sacred spring. Just before she entered and took her seat on the tripod, a goat was sacrificed in front of the temple (reconstruction of the procedures, with citations, at Parke and Wormell 1956: I.19–45).

The repetition of this series of events, month after month, would heighten the Pythia’s sensitivity to the trigger that followed as soon as she sat on the tripod – the smell of the ethylene. Of course, from the moment she took office – in fact, from her girlhood growing up in a Delphic family, even before she was chosen to be a Pythia – she would have heard about what Pythias were supposed to experience, which would precondition her as well.

One puzzle still lingers: even if there were small fissures in the bedrock under the *aduton* from which ethylene wafted upwards, there certainly was never any chasm or cleft, such as the ancients describe. Perhaps these descriptions purposely exaggerated the fissures – partly for dramatic effect and partly to reflect an old and influential myth about the Oracle’s early history, which I will discuss later in this chapter.

### *The chain of transmission*

In the first paragraph of this chapter, I gave a composite modern picture of the Pythia that described her as incoherently gibbering. I also noted, however, that several elements in the modern picture were wrong – and a gibbering Pythia is one of them. Although scholars used to assume that the Pythia went into a frenzied, raving state while on the tripod (e.g., Rohde 1925: 289–91), more recent studies have shown that not a single piece of evidence supports this idea; on the contrary, ancient sources portray the Pythia as speaking in a controlled manner (Maurizio 1995; Price 1985). The fact that the Pythia could be accused of bribery confirms this: unless she knew what she was saying and unless her own words were conveyed to the enquirers, there would be little profit in bribing her and therefore little reason to suspect that anyone had done so. Plutarch’s observation that some Pythias spoke in verse and others in prose – depending on each



Pythia's background and education – indicates that a Pythia had an effect on what came out of her own mouth, even if it were understood to have been inspired by the god. The priests may have conveyed her messages to the enquirers (if we are correct in assuming that the enquirers were waiting out of earshot) but there is no reason to think that the priests changed the messages.

Nonetheless, even if she didn't gibber, the Pythia was only one link in a long chain of transmission. To begin with, the information that Apollo handed down was not understood to begin with him. As Apollo himself says, it was Zeus' will that determined what would happen and he only passed those decisions on to mortals (Homeric *Hymn to Hermes* 532–40; cf. Homeric *Hymn to Apollo* 483–6). Once the Pythia had said what Apollo intended her to say, moreover, the message underwent further processing. The enquirers who heard the oracles often represented a distant city, and carried Apollo's words back home. There, the meaning of the words might be debated. Particularly in Athens, which had a long tradition of civic discourse, the correct interpretation of an oracle might be agreed upon only after lengthy discussion. Indeed, as Robert Parker has formulated it, "arguments about the interpretation of particular oracles are so common as to suggest that they are not a by-product but an essential part of the [Delphic Oracle's] working" (Parker 1985: 301–2).

This observation sets Greek divination apart from divination in many other cultures, where it functions as a means of "procedural intervention" – that is, a method of bringing potentially divisive debate to a close by offering a decision that the participants perceive as divinely sanctioned and free from human bias (Park 1963). In either case, divination channels public opinion toward a resolution. In either case, too, the ritualized environment in which divination takes place helps to confirm its validity (in contrast to, say, simply pulling straws within a non-ritualized setting). But the important difference is that in Greece, the divinatory process did not divest human individuals of all personal responsibility; their critical judgment, as manifested through debate, could significantly change what the oracle "meant" and therefore its effects on the human world.

### *Riddles and lots*

For debate to take place, oracles had to be open to more than one interpretation; they had to be ambiguous. This agrees with the mythic portrayal of the Delphic Oracle, which was notorious for providing answers that were so obscure or deeply encoded that enquirers misinterpreted them. To take only three examples: Croesus, the king of Lydia, asked Apollo how long his reign would last; Apollo answered that it would endure until a mule



sat on the throne of the Medes. Croesus took the answer literally and rejoiced, thinking this meant “forever.” But by “mule” Apollo meant a man named Cyrus, who like mules was a hybrid – he was of mixed parentage. Surely enough, Cyrus became the king of the Medes and toppled Croesus. Aegeus, the king of Athens, asked Apollo how he could cure his childlessness and was told to avoid “untying the foot of his wineskin” until he reached home again. Aegeus’ host, Pittheus, realized that this was a metaphorical way of telling Aegeus to abstain from sexual intercourse until his journey was over. Pittheus sent his daughter to Aegeus’ bed and thus ensured that the hero Theseus would be sired upon her instead of Aegeus’ wife. Deucalion and Pyrrha, the only survivors of the Great Flood, were told to repopulate the earth by throwing their mother’s bones over their shoulders. Initially shocked by this sacrilegious suggestion, they eventually realized that the oracle meant they should throw stones – the bones of Earth, who is mother of all (Croesus: Herodotus 1.55.2 and 1.91.5; Aegeus: Euripides, *Medea* 665–81; Deucalion and Pyrrha: Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.348–83; cf. Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 3.5, where oracular ambiguity is recognized as opening the door to unscrupulous human interpretation).

All of these oracles, and many others, are in essence riddles. Like riddles, oracles may cloak their meanings in metaphors, homonyms and double meanings. (In Aegeus’ case, the oracle plays on the fact that the ancient Greek word for “foot” is also slang for “penis.”) Like riddles, oracles may also use figurative language to present seemingly impossible situations. If Croesus had thought harder about what “mule” might mean, he would have realized how a “mule” could sit on a throne.

Delphi’s reputation for delivering ambiguous replies depended on the fact that it was what we might call a “conversational” oracle. That is, the god’s answers were crafted to address each specific situation that enquirers presented. A sort of conversation was taking place, even if it was brief and moderated by the Pythia. Conversational oracles can be contrasted with “binary” forms of divination, which use mechanical devices to obtain a straight “yes” or “no” answer. A form popular among American children during my youth involved drawing cards – red suits meant “yes” and black suits meant “no.” Such answers are clear, but they lack nuance. Binary methods also lack the personal touch; although a god usually is understood to lurk somewhere behind them, he or she is less vividly present.

This is not to say that the two forms of divination – conversational and binary – could not co-exist. A story from Plutarch and an inscription from the first half of the fourth century BCE show that divination by lot existed alongside enthusiastic prophecy at Delphi; there are also references to Delphic lot divination in a few other sources. The specific method

involved beans or pebbles. Presumably (on the model of similar methods in other cultures), the beans or pebbles were marked “yes” or “no” or were of two different colors when the question posed was of a “yes” or “no” variety (the inscription in fact refers to the process that it is regulating as the “two-bean” method). When the question was more complex there would be more beans or pebbles, each marked with a different possible answer. In Plutarch’s story, Delphi was being asked to choose among several men who wished to be king of Thessaly; each candidate marked a bean and all the beans went into a jar that was sent to Delphi, out of which the Pythia drew the winner (*BCH* 63 [1939] 184; Plutarch, *On Brotherly Love* 492b; Callimachus, *Hymn* 2.45 with scholia; Suda s.v. *Pythō*; Zenobius 5.75; cf. Amandry 1950: 29–36, 84–5 and 232–3; Parke 1967b: 109–10; Fontenrose 1978: 219–24).

A decree from the middle of the fourth century describes an extraordinary variation of this process that the Athenians developed for a special occasion. Unsure as to whether they should lease out a meadow that was sacred to the Two Goddesses, the Athenians decided to inscribe each of two tin tablets with a possible answer – “yes” and “no.” They rolled up each tablet and then wrapped it in clumps of unspun wool so that it was impossible to discern which was which. The packages were put into a bronze jar and the jar was shaken. The presiding official drew the two packages from the jar and sealed one into a silver urn and the other into a gold urn. Any Athenian who wished was allowed to add his own, personal seal to the top of the urns as well. At this point, the urns were safely stored away and a delegation traveled to Delphi to ask the god whether Athens should behave in accordance with the answer in the silver urn, or rather in accordance with the answer in the gold urn. Returning home, they opened the urn chosen by the god (we never do hear which one it was) and learned Apollo’s answer (*IG* II<sup>2</sup> 204; cf. Parke 1967b: 102–3 and Parke and Wormell 1956: I.18–19 and II no. 262).

The elaboration with which the decree spells out this procedure suggests that it was not a normal way of presenting an enquiry at Delphi. Notably, many of the details look like exceptional precautions intended to prevent any manipulation of the process, either at home in Athens or at Delphi itself – apparently, this seemingly mundane decision was highly charged. Moreover, this is not an instance of Apollo (via the Pythia) choosing a lot from a jar himself but rather a case of Apollo telling the Athenians how to choose a lot themselves. Nonetheless, the decree helps to confirm that Delphi supported and participated in lot-based divinatory methods. Amandry (1950: 29–36) suggested, in fact, that lot divination was used far more frequently at Delphi than scholars usually imagine, and that it may have provided some of the answers that we usually

assume were delivered by an enthused Pythia. In 433 BCE, for example, the Epidamnians asked Apollo whether they should hand their city over to Corinth in order to get help from the Corinthians; he said that they should (Thucydides 1.25.1). This interchange – in contrast to, say, Aegeus' question and its answer – could easily have been negotiated through lots. In other cases, we know that enquirers presented Apollo with a detailed plan and simply asked for his stamp of approval. The Cyreneans did this when they revised their ritual regulations in the late fourth century BCE and then asked Apollo whether the revisions were acceptable (*SEG* 9.72 = Sokolowski *LSS* 115, and see Parker 1983: Appendix 2). This, too, could have been accomplished by lots. It is possible that Cleisthenes' naming of the 10 new Attic tribes in the late sixth century – which was done by submitting 100 possible names to the Pythia and asking her to choose from among them – was also handled by lots (Aristotle, *Athenian Constitution* 21). Certainly, that would have been the most efficient way to deal with the situation.

There is no archaeological record of the lot oracle at Delphi (in contrast, as we'll see, there is ample archaeological evidence for the lot oracle at Dodona). Because of this, scholars have tended to reject Amandry's proposal, but this is short-sighted: it's possible that at Delphi, the enquiry was submitted orally and thus left no physical trace, or that it was submitted on some perishable material, such as wax. Narrative evidence for the Dodonian and the Delphic lot oracles is virtually non-existent (in addition to Plutarch's story, there is just one more story about lot divination, which we will get to in the section on Dodona), but this silence isn't surprising, either: choosing a bean or pebble from a jar just isn't as glamorous as what happens during enthused prophecy. It's not the stuff for which purple passages of literature are composed.

Assuming that Amandry was right that the lot oracle at Delphi was used more frequently than our sources explicitly attest (and I think he was), then how might decisions have been made about which specific enquiries should be submitted to the lots and which to the enthused Pythia? The situations I have described so far in connection with the Delphic lot oracle are important ones – the choosing of a king, the settling of an apparently tricky civic issue and (perhaps) the naming of new tribes. One can't help but wonder whether these were instances in which enquirers, consciously or not, wished to actually *restrict* Apollo's latitude of reply. Plutarch's story points in exactly this direction: when the Thessalians put lots into a jar to send to Delphi, they were selective about whose names were on those lots; the uncle of a young man named Aleuas secretly included one for his nephew, which the Pythia subsequently drew. The Thessalians, thinking there must have been some mistake, asked the god

to clarify and the Pythia confirmed that Aleuas should be appointed. Although the tale demonstrates that lots could always be fiddled with if one were determined enough, it also shows that under normal circumstances, lots could be a reassuring means of limiting the possible oracular response.

But we might imagine that the lot oracle also often served as an alternative for those who could not pay the higher fee required for enthused prophecy, or served those who needed an answer quickly and could not wait for the one day each month, nine months of the year, on which the Pythia would sit upon the tripod. Perhaps lot divination was also used when the demand for enthused responses was too high to be met; we know that in later times, there might be two or three Pythias in residence at once, but even so, the Oracle's personnel might have had to pick and choose among enquirers, shifting some of them on to the lot oracle on the basis of whatever criteria they thought appropriate.

However it worked, though, the existence of the lot oracle brings up an interesting question. If one could evade the Delphic Oracle's famous ambiguity by carefully phrasing a question so that Apollo had to answer either "yes" or "no," or at least by limiting his possible answers to (for example) the names of possible candidates for king, then why did the Oracle's reputation for ambiguity survive and, indeed, thrive? Why did the Greeks like to portray Apollo as a riddler? One answer is that the Greeks were fascinated by riddles and riddling situations – the sage Cleobulus (approx. 600 BCE) collected more than 3,000 riddles. Greek heroes excelled in solving riddles (Oedipus cracked the riddle of the Sphinx) and in disguising one thing as another, which employs the same creative deception as riddles do (Odysseus hid soldiers in a wooden horse and later escaped from the Cyclops' cave by cloaking both his name and his form). Myth told of riddle contests between famous poets or diviners, in which the stakes were sometimes life and death, as I'll discuss in Chapter 4. Greek authors from Hesiod on composed enigmas (*ainigmata*), stories with secondary meanings that listeners had to discover; Peter Struck has demonstrated that the roots of our own allegorical tradition of literary criticism lie in this Greek custom (Struck 2004). The Greeks, in sum, believed that the world and everything in it could be encoded, and enjoyed rising to the challenge that this presented. How could their oracular god not follow suit?

Another reason that the Greeks portrayed Apollo as a riddler is that this image fit well into their more general view of the gods. Divine help could be valuable, but the gods often embedded it within problems; in myth, divine gifts often prove to be disastrous – the jar opened by Pandora being the best known of these. Similarly, riddling oracles hid their meanings – and their potential usefulness – behind misleading words that tempted inept

interpreters down fatal paths. Apollo might offer help to an enquirer, then, but it was the enquirer's responsibility to decode it. Failure to do this might be fatal. During the Persian Wars, Delphic Apollo told Athens to protect itself "by wooden walls." The Athenians initially were paralyzed by their inability to agree on what "wooden walls" meant and debated the matter at some length. Eventually, the general Themistocles convinced the others that "wooden walls" referred to Athens' navy of (wooden) ships, rather than a "wooden" wall of thorn bushes surrounding the Acropolis, as the professional oracle interpreters had proposed. Themistocles turned out to be right, but if he hadn't been, many Athenian lives, and the city itself, would have been lost (Herodotus 7.140–4).

Oracular consultation, thus, was a multi-stage operation. In its course, focus gradually shifted from divine volition to human agency. First, Zeus determined his will. Next, Apollo articulated that will and the ways it impinged upon humans. Then, the Pythia spoke on Apollo's behalf, following which her listeners scrutinized and decoded Apollo's words. Finally, the listeners acted, making whatever arrangements were necessary to carry out what they took to be Apollo's advice. Another way of putting this is to say that divination, as it played out at Delphi, was not so much a matter of *solving* a problem as it was of *redirecting* a problem out of a world that human enquirers could only imagine into a world in which their actions could have concrete effects. The imagined world might be that of the gods, who made decisions that affected humans, but it might also be that of the dead, for example – a significant portion of Delphic oracles explain why the dead were disgruntled, how their disgruntlement was affecting the living, and by what means the situation might be ameliorated. The imagined world might also be simply the world of the future, which is terrifying both because it seems to depend on decisions made long ago (e.g., by fate) or decisions made by stronger parties (fate or the gods), and simultaneously because it seems to depend on choices that humans themselves must make. Consulting Apollo must have been a means of reducing stress as well as obtaining answers – if these two formulations are not simply synonymous (cf. Johnston 2005).

### *Bringing things down to earth*

According to one of the stories I mentioned earlier, the Delphic Oracle was established after goatherds chanced upon a chasm in the earth and inhaled its subterranean fumes. This is one variation of a theme found in most stories about the Oracle's foundation: Apollo may be the lord of Delphi, but Earth has power there as well.

Earth's role in the story changes from version to version. In the story of the goatherds, Earth is really just "earth" – that is, the ground beneath our feet, rather than an animate entity. In other stories, Earth is Gaea – a goddess who emerged from chaos at the beginning of time and then became the mother of all creation. Myth frequently makes Gaea the Oracle's first owner, from whom Apollo acquires it in one of two ways: either she willingly hands it over to him as a gift or he wrests it from her violently. Yet another variation, which is first narrated in the Homeric *Hymn to Apollo*, tells of Apollo's battle with an enormous snake called the Python, who guards the site where Apollo wants to build his oracle; the Python is usually said to be Gaea's child (Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 1–11; Euripides, *Iphigenia in Tauris* 1259–82; Aristonoos, *Paeon to Apollo*; Homeric *Hymn to Apollo* 300–74).

These myths about Gaea do not represent historical reality – there is no evidence that Gaea was ever the primary divinity worshipped at Delphi. Stories about Gaea's early ownership of Delphi must be read instead as one variation of a theme that runs throughout Greek myth, according to which female power initially held sway in the universe but gradually was replaced by male power (Sourvinou-Inwood 1987). The stories probably also reflect the persistent belief that sources of prophetic power dwelt in or below the earth – thus, prophetic dreams arise from under ground, for example, and Gaea really did have oracles in other parts of Greece (Euripides, *Iphigenia in Tauris* 1261–83 and *Hecuba*, 70–1; Pliny, *Natural History* 28.147; Pausanias 5.14.10). Of course, this belief aligns nicely with the story of the goatherds and the chasm, as well as with some of the rationalizing, intellectual explanations of Delphic prophecy that Plutarch's friends develop. In Greece, what we now would call "mythic" and "scientific" outlooks were not always as far apart as they are today.

One more variation of the Gaea myth will bring us back to the manner in which oracles and civic debate came together when humans made decisions. In many versions of the story, Gaea's daughter Themis owns the Oracle, either from the beginning of its existence or after receiving it from her mother. Themis later gives the Oracle to Apollo or, in a few cases, continues to work there by his side. A vase painting from about 440 BCE (Fig. 6) shows Themis seated on a tripod, giving Aegeus advice, which suggests that Themis might have been envisioned as the first Pythia – or rather, that the Pythia might have been understood to perform a duty that Themis originally performed (e.g., Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 1–11; Euripides, *Orestes* 163–5; cf. Euripides, *Iphigenia in Tauris* 1234–83; Ephorus, *FGrH* 70 31b; Aristonoos, *Paeon to Apollo*; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.320–1).

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*Figure 6* Themis sits upon the Delphic tripod in the role of the Pythia, speaking to King Aegeus of Athens; the names of each are above their heads. Drawing from A. Furtwängler and K. Reichhold, *Griechische Vasenmalerei* (1904–32) pl. 140, 3. Taken from an Attic red-figure cup by the Codros Painter, 440–430 BCE, now in the Staatliche Museen, Berlin

Themis sometimes was connected with her mother in cult, which suggests that she probably had earthy associations of her own (*IG* II<sup>2</sup> 5089; Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* 209–10; Pausanias 1.22.1 and 5.14.10). It might be said, on this basis, that Themis' ownership of the Oracle is just one more variation of the Gaea theme. The goddess's name suggests something more interesting, however. As a common noun, *themis* means "something that has been established"; we often translate it as "custom," "justice" or "what is proper and right." But Themis' appearances in myth remind us that these words are only facets of a larger concept. In the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, she presides over assemblies in which people discuss their



options, determine what they shall do and settle their differences. In one of the Homeric *Hymns* she serves as Zeus' confidant and advisor and in the *Cypria* she helps him plan the course of the Trojan War. Themis, then, embodies situations in which people come together to discuss matters and establish the course that they should take. Such assemblies were considered by the Greeks to be a mark of civilization and proper communal life. The Cyclopes, in contrast, are said by the poet of the *Odyssey* to have no communal *themistes*; each male Cyclops, instead, declares what is *themis* for his own wife and children without any concern for the others (*Iliad* 15.87–95 and 20.4–6; *Odyssey* 2.68; *Hymn* 23.2; *Cypria* = Proclus, *Chrestomathy* 1; *Odyssey* 9.112–15).

In the plural, *themis* can also mean "oracles." This makes sense, because oracles tell humans what the gods (or fate) have established for them. This idea is reflected by some of Themis' roles in myth as well – not only is she connected with the Delphic Oracle, but she foretells Thetis' fate, informs Prometheus about what will happen and is often called the mother of the Moirai, goddesses who determine each person's destiny at the moment he or she is born, for example. She is worshipped at one of the oracles dedicated to Gaea and at the Oracle of Dodona and an oracle of Zeus at Olympia as well (Pindar, *Isthmian* 8.30–45; Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* 209–10; Pausanias 5.14.10; Dakaris 1971: 52–3; Parke 1967b: 180).

How can all of this be pulled together? What does it mean that a single goddess watches over both human assemblies and oracular knowledge? One common factor is that both are ways of determining a course – either by pooling human knowledge or by relying on the knowledge of the gods. In both cases, one "establishes" a path to follow that one understands to be just and proper. Both are ways, as well, of trying to avoid improper favoritism toward a particular person or group – of determining, again, what is just and proper.

Such observations can be made about divination in virtually all societies. The difference is that the Greeks viewed divine and human means of accomplishing the desired effects as complementary, rather than mutually exclusive. Ideally, the *themis* that the gods sent down in their oracles and the *themis* that humans created in their assemblies ran seamlessly together. Sometimes, human *themis* preceded divine *themis* as when, for example, the Cyreneans composed their new purity laws and then sent them to Delphi for approval. Sometimes, as in the case of the Athenians' "wooden walls" oracle, divine *themis* came first and human *themis* second. In either case, however, humans participated in the oracular process, acting as the gods' interlocutors, even if in a distant manner. The double denotation of the word *themis*, then, like the Oracle's riddling



reputation, reflects the Greek view that, although the gods are superior to humans, humans are expected to engage with them, rather than simply wait, passively, for what the gods hand down.

### *Dodona*

When Achilles was about to send Patroclus out to the battlefield for what would turn out to be the last time, he poured a libation for Zeus and invoked him with the following words: “O High Zeus, Lord of Dodona, Pelasgian, dwelling far away, ruling over Dodona, where the winters are harsh! All around you there are the Selloi, your interpreters, who don’t wash their feet and who sleep on the ground” (*Iliad* 16.233–5). Dodona, the site of Zeus’ greatest oracle, seems mysterious to us: it lies in a remote, wintry land and is tended by men whose personal habits are rather odd. It must have seemed mysterious to the ancients as well. It was situated in north-western Greece, in an area called Thesprotia, far from what most Greeks considered the centers of civilization. Overland travel to the site would have been difficult, which meant that from Athens, for example, the best way to reach Dodona would have been to sail all the way down the east coast of the Peloponnese and then up the west coast again – much like getting from New York to San Francisco in the days before the Panama Canal was built. Thesprotia was rumored to host an oracle of the dead as well as Zeus’ oracle, and it was home to the river Acheron, which shared its name with a river of the Underworld. When Odysseus needed a special man-killing poison for the tips of his arrows, he went to the Thesprotian city of Ephyra to get it (Herodotus 5.92; *Odyssey* 1.259–62) (Fig. 7).

Thesprotia, then, was always somewhat *outré*. Nevertheless, the Oracle at Dodona was Delphi’s greatest rival. In myth, for example, each of them played an important role in the story of the Argonauts: Dodona contributed the *Argo*’s speaking figure-head, which had been hewn from a branch of its special oak tree, but it was Delphi that sent Jason on his journey to begin with (Aeschylus fr. 20; Apollonius of Rhodes, *Argonautica* 1.526–7; 1.209, 300–2, 411–12 and compare Pindar, *Pythian* 4.71–8). Dodona traced its foundation to Deucalion and Pyrrha, the only people who survived the Great Flood – but Delphi claimed, in turn, that Deucalion and Pyrrha’s boat had run aground after the flood on Mount Parnassus, where they discovered that Themis was already giving oracles and learned from her how to repopulate the earth. In the *Prometheus Bound*, Io’s father is said to have asked both Delphi and Dodona for help in dealing with his daughter’s dreadful dreams (Dodona: Aristotle, *Meteorology* 1.352a33–b2, scholiast on the *Iliad* 16.233; *Etymologicum Magnum* s.v.

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*Figure 7* Ruins of the sanctuary at Dodona in their mountainous setting including, to the right of the photo, remains of the *bouleuterion* or council chamber. Photo © Wolfgang Kaehler/Corbis

*Dōdōnaios*; Plutarch, *Life of Pyrrhus*, 1; Delphi: Pindar, *Olympian* 9.42–53; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* I.348–83; Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* 829; Sophocles fr. 460).

Outside of myth, authors often pair Delphi and Dodona together as well. Xenophon, for example, advises those Athenians who want to go forward with plans to improve the city to “send to Dodona and Delphi and ask the gods whether such a plan will benefit the state both now and in the future” (*Ways and Means* 6.2). Dodona’s panhellenic importance would seem to be challenged by the fact that our collection of divinatory lead tablets (to be discussed below) attests to very few official enquiries from states outside of Dodona’s immediate neighborhood; enquiries from private individuals show a somewhat broader geographic span but still cluster around the immediate region (Parke 1967b: 113; Christidis et al. 1999: 67–8). This might tempt us to conclude that, although Dodona was placed on an equal plane with Delphi rhetorically or mythically, it was less often consulted by outsiders in practice. Even this conjecture is insecure, however, because the lead tablets were used in a lot oracle, a type of divination that, as I mentioned already during discussion of Delphi, is likely to be used to answer questions that are simpler in form than those

addressed to a priestess in a state of altered consciousness, or (when there are more questions than such a priestess can handle) is likely to be used to answer questions that seem less important. In other words, our evidence for Dodona may be misleadingly skewed toward the local enquirer and the quotidian question simply because its lot oracle, in contrast to Delphi's, left behind material traces. It is safest to call the ancient competition between Delphi and Dodona a draw: both were important oracular centers indeed.

In terms of age we must declare a draw as well; it is impossible to tell which of the two oracles was first established. Each makes its literary debut in the Homeric poems, and although Herodotus and some other authors claim that Dodona's oracle was older, archaeology fails either to confirm or to refute that opinion. Remains at Dodona's sanctuary go back to the eighth century, as compared with the ninth-century remains at Delphi, but because we don't know when either sanctuary incorporated an oracle, the difference proves nothing. There are, moreover, signs of settlement at both sites before there are clear signs of a sanctuary.

Zeus had no temple at Dodona until the late fifth century, but as one of the site's excavators, Sotirios Dakaris, noted, the Oracle may have operated under the open sky, particularly if it centered on an oak tree as many ancient sources indicate it did. (Similarly, as we will see in Chapter 3, Apollo's oracle at Didyma was kept open to the sky.) Demon, a historian of the late fourth century BCE, explained that the outer wall of Zeus' Oracle at Dodona was comprised of bronze cauldrons sitting on tripods – we'll return to the possible role of these cauldrons later, but for the moment, it is interesting to note that excavators have found many fragments of bronze cauldrons and tripods dating to the second half of the eighth century on the site. Dakaris, drawing on these remains and on Demon's remarks, conjectured that the tripods and cauldrons encircled the sacred oak tree, creating a sort of open-air sanctuary similar to that at many other Greek sites. Even when a temple for Zeus was finally built, it was small and was used to store offerings, rather than serving as the place from which the oracles came forth, as at Delphi. Certainly, the sanctuary had other grand buildings, including a theater, a stadium, temples to Themis, Dione and Aphrodite, and a *bouleuterion* (council chamber), but the most sacred of places within it has left few, if any, remains (Herodotus 2.52; Plato, *Phaedrus* 275b; Pausanias 10.12.10; Demon as quoted by Stephanus Byzantius s.v. *Dōdōnē*; cf. Parke 1967b: 40–2 and 86–9 with notes; Dakaris 1971: 27–32 and 39–41).

*Men and women; birds and trees*

Dodona is no less mysterious today than it was in the past, although for different reasons. We have little information about how the oracle there operated – or rather, we have many pieces of information that don't fit easily into a single picture. Ancient sources allude to six or seven (depending on how one counts) different methods. The first involves the Selloi. The word that the *Iliad* uses to describe them, “interpreters” (*hypophētai*), implies that they were Zeus' prophets, conveying his will to mortals. More than one scholar has suggested that the Selloi's dirty feet and the fact that they slept on the ground point to the fact that they obtained their prophetic power from the earth itself, perhaps receiving messages in dreams while they slept. This makes some sense, considering the importance of emanations from the earth at Delphi.

The Selloi linger on in descriptions of Dodona through late antiquity, sometimes being called Helloi instead (Hesiod calls the area around Dodona “Hellopia”), but they never reveal anything more about themselves – it's as if later authors simply borrowed them from the *Iliad* to lend a bit of archaic color to what they were saying. If the Selloi ever really existed, they may have disappeared or diminished in importance as time went on; their prophetic duties may have been transferred to other personnel; something similar happened at Didyma, as the next chapter will discuss (Hesiod fr. 181 Most; Sophocles, *Women of Trachis* 1164–8; Aristotle, *Meteorologia* 1. 352a33–b2; Pindar fr. 59.3 and compare Strabo 7.7.10 and 7 fr. 1.).

The second method involves not men but women – or at least females. We hear about creatures called *peleiai*, but whether one takes the word to refer to female doves (which is what it literally means) or priestesses called “Doves” depends on what ancient source one chooses to read. Either way, the *peleiai* are closely linked with some of Dodona's foundation myths, as well its oracular function, and it will be easiest to approach their role in the latter from the vantage point of the former.

Herodotus said that according to the Egyptians, two Egyptian priestesses once were kidnapped by Phoenicians; one was taken to Libya, where she founded the Oracle of Ammon, and the other to Dodona, where she founded the Oracle of Zeus. A priestess at Dodona itself, however, gave Herodotus a different story. She said that two black doves once flew from Egypt to Libya and Dodona. The one that settled in Dodona took up residence in a sacred oak tree and began to prophesy in a human voice – her first message being that an oracular center should be built there. Herodotus, groping for a way to reconcile (and rationalize) the two stories,

suggested that the woman who was brought to Dodona was referred to as a “dove” because her Egyptian speech could not be understood by the locals; to them it sounded like the chattering of birds. She was called a *black* dove because Egyptians were dark-skinned. She was the first of a long line of Dove priestesses; in later times, there were usually three on duty at once, as was the case at Delphi in later times, too (2.52–7).

Other authors draw the doves and the sacred oak closer together still. Several mention that a woodcutter once tried to cut down the tree but was warned by a talking dove in its branches to desist; thereafter an oracle was established. Some give the woodcutter a name, Hellos, and thus make him the eponymous ancestor of the Helloi/Selloi, as if to accommodate both the priests and the doves within a single foundation myth. A third variation specifies that when Deucalion came to Dodona after the flood, it was a dove who told him what to do next, speaking from her perch in the oak tree (scholia to *Odyssey* 14.327 = Proxenus, *FGrH* 703 fr. 7; Philostratus the Lemnian, *Imagines* 2.33; scholia to *Iliad* 16.233; further on the sources for all of these stories, see Parke 1967b: 35–40).

So we have two strands of a single tradition – in one of them female doves speak prophetically at Dodona and in the other human women do. To us, the first may sound like “only a myth” (it may remind us of the mythic prophet Mopsus, who learned the future by listening to birds), but it does have some connection with reality. In antiquity, the sounds and behaviors of many animals, but particularly birds, were considered to be prophetic (cf. pages 128–32 below). We might guess that behind these stories was a practice whereby the sounds made by real doves kept in the sanctuary at Dodona were interpreted prophetically by priestesses called Doves (and the Suda, s.v. *Dōdōnē*, actually says something close to this). Somewhat differently, Strabo conjectured that “perhaps there was something exceptional about the flight of the doves” at Dodona, from which the priestesses drew conclusions, but the point is the same: human Doves convey to enquirers the messages sent by real doves (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 104–21; Strabo 7.7.10 and *Epitome* 7, fr. 1a).

During the classical period, we learn more about the human Doves. Plato says: “It was when they were in a prophetic state (*maneisai*) that the prophetess at Delphi and the priestesses at Dodona performed so many good services for which both states and individuals are grateful. When thinking clearly [i.e., ‘normally’] they accomplished little or nothing” (*Phaedrus* 244a8–b3). This suggests that the Dodonian Doves, like the Pythia, went into an altered state of consciousness to prophesy. Pausanias, similarly, includes the Doves in his category of women who give oracles under the influence of a god (*emanteusanto ek theou*) and Christian writers claimed that “when the god wanted to give an oracle,” the Dodonian

priestesses “prophesied what the divinity threw into them” after they had been “filled with the harmonic sound of a ringing cauldron” – an interesting parallel for the conjecture that the Pythia’s trance was triggered by the smell of ethylene, to which I will return. Maximus of Tyre claimed that the Selloi prophesied under the influence of a god – transferring what the priestesses were reputed to do back onto the earlier, male representatives of the cult (Pausanias 10.12.10; Nonnus the Abbot quoting Gregory of Nazianzus, Migne *PG* 36.1045a; Cosmas of Maiuma, *Spicilegium Romanum* 2.172; cf. Suda s.v. *Dōdōnē*; Maximus of Tyre, *Lecture* 8, 1b; Cook 1902: 20–1).

Modern scholars have been hesitant to accept the idea that anything like enthused prophecy really took place at Dodona, in part because the archaeological evidence points in another direction, as I’ll discuss below. For the moment, I will leave that issue open and move on to the third method of prophecy associated with Dodona, which involves the sacred oak. Often, the tree itself, rather than the doves nesting in its branches, was represented as speaking: “Odysseus was going to Dodona, so that from the god’s divine, high-leafed oak tree he might hear the will of Zeus, on the question of how he should return to the land of Ithaca, openly or secretly” (*Odyssey* 14.327–30 = 19.296–9). Hesiod says that people from all over the earth bring back prophecies from the trunk of an oak tree in Dodona (fr. 181 Most; cf. fr. 270) and Prometheus, telling Io that he already knows what has happened to her so far in her journey, says that she has traveled to: “Dodona, where the oracles are, and the seat of Thesprotian Zeus, and an incredible wonder, the talking oaks, which clearly – not enigmatically! – addressed you as the woman who would be the famous spouse of Zeus” (Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* 830–4). Socrates says that Dodona’s oak was considered to have spoken (*ephēsan*) the very first prophetic utterances, and the *Argo*’s speaking figure-head, carved from a branch of the sacred Dodonian oak, draws on the idea of a speaking tree as well. Ovid’s Aeacus avers that the Dodonian oak can produce meaningful sounds even when there is nary a breath of wind. But as Strabo said about exactly this topic, poetic license permits all kinds of exaggeration; Sophocles may hit nearer the mark of what really happened in the cult when he says that the oak spoke its messages through the lips of the “twin Doves” at Dodona (Plato, *Phaedrus* 275a–b; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 7.629–30; Strabo 7.7.10 and *Epitome* 7, fr. 1a; Sophocles, *Women of Trachis* 171–2).

### *Springs and cauldrons*

Apollo’s oracles at Claros and Didyma traced their prophetic powers to springs that exuded special waters; at Delphi, the Pythia had to bathe

in the Castalian spring before prophesying. There are traces of a similar idea at Dodona, too, although they are found only in late sources. Servius, commenting on *Aeneid* 3.466, tells us that a spring used to flow from under the roots of the sacred oak. The gods inspired its waters to murmur, and the murmurs were interpreted by an old woman named Pelias. (Her name could be taken to mean either “dove” or “gray,” i.e., “old.”) Pliny, more spectacularly, says that a spring at Dodona quenched torches that were plunged beneath its surface but then re-ignited them, and also that it flowed only between midnight and noon (*Natural History* 2.228; cf. *Etymologicum Magnum* s.v. *anapauomenon hudōr*).

No traces of any particularly prominent spring are now to be found at Dodona. Therefore, although purification processes must have required the Oracle’s personnel to have fresh water close at hand, it’s hard to believe that a special spring was ever central to the process of consultation itself. It’s interesting, however, that the idea of an inspirational spring eventually attached itself to Dodona; this attests both to the practice of embroidering great religious sites with additional, remarkable physical characteristics (certainly, Pliny’s description of the spring makes it sound spectacular) and to the tendency to transfer the traits of one oracle to another.

No other site ever claimed to have anything like Dodona’s bronze cauldrons, however. Regarding this marvel, the ancient sources are even more tangled than usual; the following description condenses (and in the process unavoidably reconciles) several different stories, for each of which A.B. Cook (1902) and H.W. Parke (1967b: 86–91) provide more detailed descriptions and further ancient citations. The number of the cauldrons varies from source to source – there may have been just one or there may have been several. According to Demon, we recall, there were so many cauldrons that when they were set atop tripods and placed in a circle, they served as the temple’s exterior wall. The cauldrons were made of such fine bronze that when they were touched, a bell-like ringing filled the temple for the rest of the day. Touching just one, moreover, sympathetically set off the others, too. A bronze statue of a boy, given to Dodona by the Corcyreans, was part of this process: it held a whip that moved freely in the wind, striking a cauldron now and again (Strabo 7 fr. 3; Stephanus of Byzantium s.v. *Dōdōnē*; Suda s.v. *Dōdōnē*). It is this sonorousness, in fact, that first motivates mention of the cauldrons in ancient sources and it is only later authors, especially Christian authors, who claim that the cauldrons have anything to do with the Oracle itself; as I mentioned above, some Christians theorized that the cauldrons’ harmonious (*enharmonios*) ringing sent the Dodonian priestess into a trance, and Clement of Alexandria clumps the Dodonian cauldron together with the Delphic



tripod and other famous oracular devices, condemning all of them as godless – and moribund – remnants of paganism. The Suda said that the cauldron's prophetic sounds were really the voices of countless demons, which fits with the widespread Christian tendency to attribute divination to demons. We might be tempted to dismiss the cauldrons' connection with prophecy as another Christian fantasy, then, were it not for Lucan, who in a single breath mentions "the Delian tripods, the Pythian chasms and the sounds Dodona makes with the bronze [cauldron] of Jupiter." Clearly, by the first century BCE at least, pagans also thought the cauldrons had something to do with prophecy at Dodona (Menander, *Arrephorous* fr. 60 Sandbach; Callimachus, *Hymn to Apollo* 286 and fr. 483 Pf.; Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Greeks* 2.11; Suda s.v. *Dōdōnē*; Lucan 6.425; cf. Philostratus the Lemnian, *Imagines* 2.33, 388K20–5).

We could explain the cauldrons' connection with prophecy by going back to the same hypothesis as we entertained for the talking doves and the talking tree – by guessing that the priestesses interpreted the cauldron's sounds just as they might have interpreted the cries of the doves or the rustling of the tree's leaves. Philostratus the Athenian describes something that works similarly: golden devices called *inynges* (spinning disks suspended from ropes) that hung from the ceiling of a special royal chamber in Persia. The *inynges* were supposed to help the king of Persia make fair decisions when he sat in judgment. The king's attendants, the *magi*, kept the *inynges* "harmonically tuned" (*harmottesthai*), which indicates that they emitted some sort of noises when they spun; the fact that the *magi* called them the "tongues of the gods" points toward sounds as well, as does the very word "*inynx*," which is associated with sound from its earliest appearances in our sources (*Life of Apollonius* 1.25; cf. Johnston 1995: 183–4).

But Lucan's specific combination of Dodonian *sounds*, Delian *tripods* and Delphic *chasms* suggests that we should take a closer look at some of the Christians' remarks and consider the possibility that the cauldrons' harmonic ringing triggered an altered state of consciousness in the priestesses. We know almost nothing about the Oracle of Apollo on Delos, to which Lucan's "Delian tripods" alludes (the description of it at *Aeneid* 3.84–99 probably is fictitious, as Parke 1986: 127 suggests; cf. the passage from Lucian quoted on page 76 below), but we do know that at Delphi, taking a seat on the tripod was an essential part of the Pythia's preparation for receiving Apollo and therefore we might guess that this was true at the Delian Oracle as well. Similarly, the chasm from which the fumes arose at Delphi helped to effect the Pythia's reception of the god. In other words, tripods and chasms do not, in themselves, give forth prophecies; rather, they provide the *stimulus* for entering into a



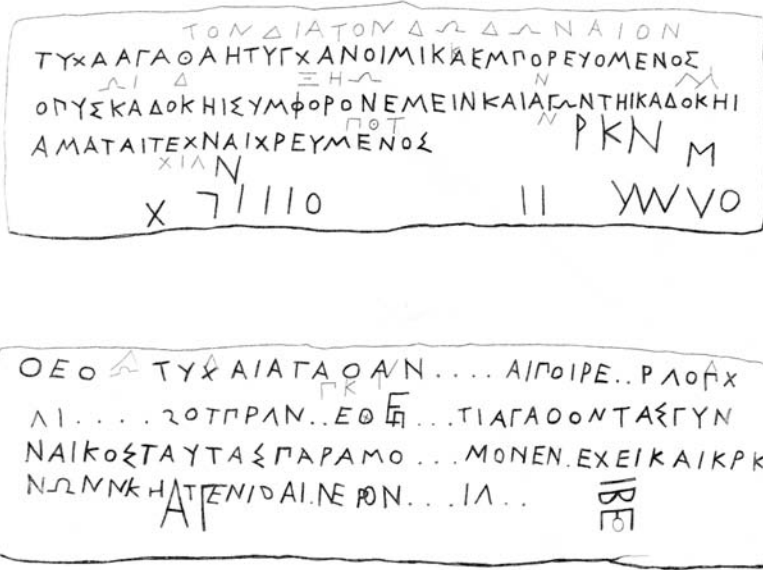
prophetic state, just as some Christians suggested the ringing of bronze cauldrons did at Dodona.

This needn't have been the original purpose of the cauldrons; perhaps it was never their sole purpose during any period, early or late. The cauldrons and whip-bearing statue may have started out as temple marvels similar to those that the ancient engineer Heron described – special *automata* that caused temple doors to spring open when fires were ignited on altars outside, for example, or statues that moved of their own accord. Such marvels might perform tasks that accompanied a ceremony, or might enhance the sacred aura of the temple more generally, without being understood to have a specific numinosity of their own. Perhaps the Dodonian cauldrons drifted back and forth between categories, sometimes being considered simply a temple marvel and at other times considered intrinsic to the prophetic process. At the end of my discussion of Dodona, I will return to this issue, but first we will look, finally, at the only Dodonian divinatory method that has archaeological attestation: lead tablets.

### *Lead tablets*

The tablets are small pieces of lead foil (averaging about one inch by three inches), on which questions were inscribed, addressed either to Zeus or to Zeus and Dione, who was his cult partner at Dodona. Lead, which is soft and fairly easy to obtain, was a common medium for all kinds of writing in antiquity (Fig. 8). Most of the tablets are palimpsests, which suggests that the sanctuary provided them to enquirers and then collected them later for reuse. The varied handwriting, alphabets and dialects in which the questions were written, however, suggest that it was usually the enquirers or their personal scribes who actually wrote the questions. The tablets were rolled up or folded so that the questions were hidden on the inside; on the outside were inscribed the enquirers' names or initials. These characteristics suggest a concern with protecting the privacy of the enquirer (which might have been desirable, for example, in an enquiry such as that of Lysanias, quoted below) and with ensuring that the priestess who delivered the god's answer to the question could not influence it, consciously or unconsciously. At the end of Chapter 3, we'll see another case of enquirers using writing to convey their questions to an oracle, but we'll also see that there were ways that an unscrupulous prophet could manipulate the process, anyway.

According to A.-P. Christidis (Christidis et al. 1999), there are about 1,400 tablets from Dodona, which range in date from the sixth century – that is, fairly soon after literacy began to become widespread in Greece – to the



*Figure 8* Drawing of a lead tablet from Dodona, taken from Carapanos #18 (plate 37 #4). Lhôte (#89) identifies three separate inscriptions by different hands on the front and two more on the back. The most recent and longest inscription reads: “Good fortune. Can I have such fortune as seems profitable to me by trading and by exporting, where it seems good to me with skill?” The dialect suggests that the writer was from Rhodes. Date: fourth century BCE

third century BCE; unfortunately, only 167 of them have been published. (Éric Lhôte’s new edition, French translation and commentary of the published tablets [2006], which arrived too late for me to use fully in preparing this manuscript, is a welcome contribution. English readers can find a selection of tablets in translation in Parke 1967b: Appendix I.)

The questions on the tablets are almost always posed in such a way that they can be answered “yes” or “no”:

- Geris asks Zeus concerning a wife, whether it is better for him to take one. (Lhôte #25)
- Heracleidas asks Zeus and Dione . . . whether there will be any offspring from his wife Aigle. (Lhôte #46)
- Lysanias asks Zeus Naios and Deona [Dione] whether the child with which Annyla is pregnant is not from him. (Lhôte #49)
- Cleotas asks Zeus and Dione whether it is better and profitable for him to keep sheep. (Lhôte #80)

- The consultants ask Zeus Naios and Dione whether they should consult Dorios the *psychagōgos* [invoker of souls]. (Lhôte #144)

The binary style of the enquiries and a story told by Cicero (our only narrative description of the Dodonian lot oracle) suggest how the process worked:

But indeed the greatest warning given to the Spartans was that, when they consulted Zeus of Dodona to ask about victory, and the ambassadors had properly set up the jar in which the lots (*sortes*) were held, a pet monkey belonging to the king of the Molossi overturned the lots and everything else that had been prepared for the process, scattering them this way and that. Then the priestess who was in charge of the oracle is said to have told the Spartans that they should focus on staying safe rather than on winning victories. (*Divination* 1.34.76 = Callisthenes *FGrH* 124 22a and b)

It seems likely that the rolled and folded tablets on which the questions were written were put into a jar. In another jar were placed pebbles, beans or small balls of clay that were marked or colored to signify either “yes” or “no.” The priestess drew a tablet out of one jar and a lot out of the other. She looked at the initial or name on the back of the folded tablet and at the lot in her other hand and thus was able to declare, for example, “Gerioton, Zeus says yes to what you asked,” or “Lysanias, Zeus says no to what you asked.” The priestess needn’t ever know what the enquirer was asking about under this system.

Some tablets ask Zeus to choose amongst other gods:

- Thrasyboulos asks by sacrificing to and appeasing which god will he become healthier in his eyes? (Lhôte #72)

At first glance, it may not seem as if such questions could be answered by the binary process I just described, but there are two possible ways of getting around the difficulties. Either there was a second jar of lots, each inscribed with the name of a god, out of which the priestess drew an answer, instead of drawing from the jar of lots marked “yes” or “no” (somewhat on the model of Plutarch’s story about how the Delphic Oracle chose the new king of Thessaly); or the priestess used the jar of “yes” and “no” lots but converted the original question into a series of binary questions through a process similar to our game of Twenty Questions:

- Is the answer Zeus? A black lot says “no.”
- Is the answer Hera? Another black lot says “no” again.
- Is the answer Hermes? Finally, a white lot says “yes.”

This could go on for quite some time, but eventually one would get an answer. If all the lots came up black, the enquirer presumably would be told that no god was willing to help him. Either method would mean that the priestess had to know that a particular tablet asked this sort of question, but this would not be an insurmountable problem – perhaps enquirers dropped them into a different jar from the others.

### *Fitting it all together?*

Is it possible to create, even hypothetically, a single picture that brings together the seven methods of Dodonian prophecy attested by our sources (Selloi, priestesses, doves, oak tree, spring, cauldrons, tablets)? If so, what would such a picture tell us?

Originally, the spring was probably not central to Dodona's prophetic operations; the evidence for it is sparse and late and likely to have been influenced by the importance of springs at other oracles. The Selloi, if they ever existed, seem to have grown less important as time went on, ceding their role to the Dove priestesses, perhaps in imitation of Delphi and its female Pythia. For most of the Oracle's history, it is the priestesses called Doves, real doves, the oak tree, the cauldrons and the lead tablets that we hear about most – although some of these swim in and out of prominence, depending on the type of source we are using or the period of history at which we are looking.

The priestesses are said by ancient sources to have prophesied under the influence of a god; that is, they were in a state of altered consciousness, or *mania*, as Plato calls it; possibly, at least during certain periods, this state was triggered in part by the ringing sound of a bronze cauldron being struck. It's likely that noises made by the doves, the tree or both conveyed messages to the priestesses while they were in this state – tradition attributes speech to both the doves and the tree, which suggests that, after listening to the sounds they heard, the priestesses would “interpret” or “translate” them for the enquirer as the god's advice (the explanation offered already in the *Suda* comes close to this). It may be that during different periods, either the tree or the birds served as the dominant means of conveying Zeus' voice at Dodona; it may even be that from day to day the medium through which Zeus' voice was conveyed changed, as taste or necessity demanded. Of course, if one wants to be terribly rational about it, one can find support in Herodotus for an obvious means of resolving the two methods: birds tend to sit in trees; one could choose to understand their voices as the voice of the tree.

In any case, we can reasonably well bring together four elements of Dodonian prophecy that are mentioned in literary sources (dove

priestesses, doves, cauldrons and oak tree) under a single model, centering on sounds that were interpreted by women, while in an altered state of consciousness, to be messages from Zeus. One morsel of the scant information we have about the spring might help to confirm this picture: Servius tells us the murmuring of its water was interpreted by the priestesses as well. If Servius or his source (working from an awareness of other oracular sites) assumed that Dodona must have had a prophetically important spring but also knew that the priestesses there listened to and interpreted sounds, it would have been an easy step to the idea that at Dodona one *listened* to a spring, rather than touching it, bathing in it or drinking of its water, as at other oracles.

Dodona probably used the lead tablets as an alternative to inspired prophecy, for the same reasons as Delphi used lot divination. It is tempting to assume that lot divination was more prominent at Dodona than at Delphi – the sheer number of lead tablets makes a big impression – but this is not necessarily so. We have no idea how questions were usually submitted to the lot oracle at Delphi; we know only that in contrast to Dodona, they left behind no physical remains. Nor, not surprisingly, have we found the beans or pebbles that were used to provide the answers at either site. It is anyone's guess as to how frequently, compared with enthused prophecy, the procedure was used at either place.

What is more important to take away from all of this is an appreciation of the fact that two oracular methods that scholars (with the exception of Amandry) have been accustomed to set against one another – inspired prophecy and divination by lot – could exist comfortably side by side. What one cared about when one went to an oracle was getting an answer from Zeus or Apollo while in a place that reverberated with his presence. Divination by lot could, after all, be fairly easily performed at home; one made the journey to Delphi or Dodona and asked the Pythia or the Dove to draw the lot because (to return to the point I made at the beginning of this chapter) *place mattered*. Delphi presented itself as the center of the earth; Dodona, or so people said, was where the very first oracle of all had been established, chosen by a dove. Both had taken the trouble to develop themselves into spectacular sites, with theaters, stadiums and other attractions. These were impressive places – places where one felt not only closer to the gods but also enwrapped in importance oneself. A consultation at Delphi or Dodona must have given the business about which one came to enquire a certain additional gravity – not only in the eyes of the world, perhaps, but also in one's own eyes. In the next chapter we will see some further examples of the significance of location, and how myth and ritual worked to situate the gods' voices within the human world.

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## CHAPTER 3

# *The Divine Experience*

## *Part Two: Claros, Didyma and Others*



Apollo has taken up a very active profession and is almost completely deaf because of all the requests for prophecies that he receives. At one moment he has to be in Delphi, then he runs to Colophon and from there to Xanthus and then he goes to Delos or the Branchidae. Wherever a prophet bids him to appear after drinking from the sacred well or chewing laurel leaves or setting the tripod shaking, there he must show up immediately and start spouting prophecies or else he'll lose his reputation.

So says Zeus, as part of a long complaint about how hard humans make the gods work (Lucian, *The Double Indictment* 1). Two of the oracles that Zeus mentions (Xanthus and Delos) are little more than names to us, but two of the others formed, with Delphi, the Big Three of Apollonian prophecy: Claros, an oracle and sacred grove that belonged to the city of Colophon on the coast of Asia Minor, and Didyma, which lay about 45 miles south of Claros and was associated with a priestly clan called the Branchidae. Both are mentioned frequently in ancient sources.

### *Claros*

Archaeology suggests that the sanctuary at Claros was founded by at least the eighth century BCE. The oracle there is mentioned in the epic *Epigoni* and Hesiod knew of a famous divinatory contest that had taken place in Claros between the seers Calchas and Mopsus, the latter of whom was known as one of the Oracle's founders; Claros is one of Apollo's favored places according to a Homeric *Hymn to Artemis*. Didyma was active by at least the seventh century and prominent by the late sixth century BCE; the way that Herodotus treats it suggests that it was one of the most

important oracles during the fifth century (interestingly, he does not seem to know the Clarian Oracle). Both oracles kept operating well into the late imperial age (*Epigoni* fr. 4 West; Hesiod fr. 214 Most; Homeric *Hymn* 9; Herodotus 1.46.2, 92.2, 157.3; 2.159.3; 5.36.3; 6.19.2–3.)

But in spite of their fame and longevity, we know relatively little about either oracle. For Claros we have only three sources that tell us how a prophetic session worked. Tacitus says that the prophet – a man who had been chosen from one of a few families in the nearby city of Miletus – was told how many people were making enquiries and what their names were, and then descended into the “cave” – that is, the small chamber that excavators have found beneath the main floor of the temple. Once in the cave, the man drank from a sacred spring and, without ever having been told what the enquirers had come to ask about, he answered their questions. The man was usually illiterate and ignorant of poetry, but managed nonetheless to produce his replies in good meter. Pliny adds that the sacred water shortened the lives of those who drank it. Iamblichus tells us that the descent into the cave took place only on certain nights and after lengthy ceremonies that included fasting and purifications. Drawing on his Neoplatonic ideas of how gods and mortals interact, he theorized that the god “illuminated” the sacred water with prophetic power, which passed into the drinker’s own spirit and paved the way for the god to use that spirit as an instrument (*organon*) for prophecy. Behind this specialized analysis we glimpse what was probably the common belief: as at Delphi, the god was understood to possess the human enthusiastically. (Tacitus, *Annales* 2.54; Pliny, *Natural History* 2.232; Iamblichus, *Mysteries* 3.11.)

During the imperial age, people who enquired at the Clarian Oracle frequently left a record of their visit on the exterior walls, steps and columns of the temple itself. They inscribed their names, the names of their cities, the dates of their visits and the names of the officials who took care of them during their visit. From this material we learn that three people were central to the oracular procedure: a prophet, who served a year-long term, and a priest and a *thespiōidos* (“singer of prophecies”), each of whom held office for a longer period. There were also scribes, whose duty was to keep records of consultations. Some scholars suggest that the prophet drank the water from the sacred spring and the *thespiōidos* put what he subsequently said into verse. Others argue that the roles were reversed, with the *thespiōidos* drinking the water and the prophet composing verses. Either interpretation contradicts Tacitus’ statement that the person who drank the water spoke in verse himself – although it is possible that customs changed over time.

Whoever it was who drank the water, he was probably the only person admitted to the underground “cave” that enclosed the sacred spring.

Excavations have shown, however, that there was a second room adjoining it, with benches where other people, probably the cult personnel, could sit. Inscriptions suggest that in special cases, even enquirers might be admitted this far, if they had undergone initiation ceremonies.

Who consulted the Oracle and what sorts of things did they ask? At least during the imperial period, which is the time for which we have the best evidence, we know that the clientele came almost exclusively from Asia Minor, rather than the Greek mainland. What they asked about is harder to recover. We have only 25 oracles from Claros, all but one of which date from the first through the third centuries CE (the exception, which concerns the refoundation of the city of Smyrna, dates to the late fourth century BCE). Nineteen oracles were delivered to cities and addressed such questions as how to combat the plague, how to ward off pirates and what to make of a large skeleton and coffin that had been found in a river bed (Apollo replied that these belonged to Orontes, the river's eponymous hero). These are not very different from the questions that cities took to other oracles.

Six of our reports concern oracles delivered to individuals. Some of them address such matters as how to be cured of an illness, or who should be the priest of a particular cult, but others are quite different. It seems that in later antiquity, people started to ask Claros, as well as some other oracles, to describe the nature of god; on one occasion, Claros said that Zeus, Hades, Helios and Dionysus were one and the same – a sign of the henotheistic times (Merkelbach-Stauber #28).

More complicated is the case of the oracle that Merkelbach and Stauber (1996) designate as #25 in their corpus. When a man from the town of Oenoanda in southwestern Asia Minor inscribed a sacred law on part of his city wall in the third century CE, he preceded it with three lines of what look like oracular text. The inscription, in its entirety, reads:

“Self-born, untaught, born without a mother,  
undisturbable,  
Unable to be named, many-named, dwelling in fire,  
That is God: we are a small part of God, his angels.”  
This, then, to those who asked about God's nature  
The god replied, calling him all-seeing Aether: look to him  
And pray at dawn, looking to the east.

The same three lines of verse were recorded by Lactantius, who claimed they were the beginning of a 21-line oracle delivered by Clarian Apollo (unfortunately he did not preserve the 18 other lines for us). The three lines also made their way into a Christian compilation of the late fifth century entitled *Prophecies of the Greek Gods* (now more commonly known as the

*Theosophy of Tübingen*, a name chosen by its first editor, Karl Buresch, to mark the city where its most important manuscript was located), which was intended by its compiler to prove that the pronouncements of the pagan oracles were actually in accord with holy scripture. The compiler claims to have found this particular oracle in Porphyry's earlier collection, *On the Philosophy of Oracles*. Wherever the compiler found them, however, in the *Theosophy* these three lines serve not as the beginning but rather as the end of a 16-line oracle given to a man named Theophilus, who had asked whether Apollo himself was god or whether god was someone else. There is no indication of where Apollo delivered his answer to Theophilus – at Claros, at Didyma, at Delphi or somewhere else (Lactantius, *The Divine Institutions* 1.71; *Theosophy of Tübingen* 13 Erbse = 1.2 Beatrice; Merkelbach-Stauber ##26 and 27; cf. Lane Fox 1986: 189–200; Busine 2005: 202–8; Graf forthcoming).

In the end, it is impossible to be sure whether the three lines are from a genuine Clarian oracle – or even from an oracle at all; both the lines themselves and the longer contexts in which they are embedded have a certain Platonizing tone, and it may well be that they made their way into the oracular tradition after having been composed for quite a different purpose originally. Nonetheless, the ease with which they were pulled into the oracular orbit and then used as fuel for debates about the nature of god demonstrates how both Christians and pagans were beginning to look to the words of the gods to answer questions that were very different from what they had been in centuries past.

Another enquirer, from the second century, had quite a different purpose in mind when he collected oracles, however. The Cynic philosopher Oenomaus of Gadara asked Clarian Apollo for advice and received a rather vague, flowery reply describing a “garden of Heracles” that he would receive in return for his toils. Symbolically understood, this seemed to promise success. But later, Oenomaus found out that the same reply had been given to numerous other enquirers who had all kinds of concerns – and few of whom had ever reached any “garden” of success. His suspicions aroused, Oenomaus approached Clarian Apollo twice again, and twice received responses so obscure as to be uninterpretable. Oenomaus ended up writing a treatise called *The Exposure of Cheats*, in which he condemned the oracular arts (Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel* 209c–233c, esp. 214a–d).

Oenomaus' experience could be used to explain how the man who spoke the oracles at Claros could do so without knowing exactly what each enquirer asked about. If the responses were broad enough, after all, they would include semantic gaps that could be opened up toward any event. The dice oracles that I will discuss later in this chapter used exactly this

approach. But some of the oracles that survive from Claros are lengthy, extremely specific and well tailored to the enquirers' concerns. Deadly plagues that swept through Asia Minor during the 160s CE produced some of the best examples of this type. We know about them because five cities that asked Apollo for help against the illness (Pergamum, Hieropolis, Caesarea Trokketa, Callipolis and another, unspecified city that we guess was Sardis) inscribed his answers. These answers provide a valuable case study of the way that oracles sometimes took care to gauge the needs of those who consulted them and provide the answers their clients were likely to appreciate.

To combat the plague, Apollo advised the people of Pergamum to establish four choirs of young men to sing hymns to Zeus, Dionysus, Athena and Asclepius, and to make sacrifices. He told the people of Hieropolis that the Earth was angry because of the death of the Python, and advised them to make sacrifices to her, to Aether, and to various other gods. He also told them to consecrate statues of Apollo the Archer, who averted plagues, and to send choirs of boys and girls to sing in his precinct at Claros. The citizens of Caesarea Trokketa were also told to set up a statue of Apollo the Archer and, additionally, to sprinkle their houses with pure spring water mixed with sulfur. The citizens of Callipolis were advised to make holocaust sacrifices to the gods that dwell under the earth, including Hades and Persephone, and to pour the sacrificed animals' blood into pits. They, too, were told to erect a statue of Apollo the Archer. The people of the fifth city – probably Sardis – were told to look to Artemis of the Golden Quiver for help, fetching her statue from Artemis' temple in Ephesus and setting it up in their own temple back home. With her torches, Artemis would “dissolve the magical poisons (*pharmaka*)” of the plague and would “melt down the waxen dolls that are the signs that an evil magician has been at work.” Once all this had been done, the people were to honor both Apollo and Artemis with hymns, sacrifices, dancing and feasting (on this last inscription, see Graf 1992).

Clearly, these responses couldn't have been standard texts, kept for use on any occasion. Each one not only prescribed different remedies but assumed different causes for the plague – human neglect of various gods, the anger of the Earth, the work of a wicked magician. “Apollo” knew what sort of answer would suit each locale (on this point, see Várhelyi 2001). Perhaps the enquirers even negotiated the answer in advance without quite knowing it; we can imagine that each city's ambassador to the Oracle might have discussed his own theories with the sanctuary's personnel before Apollo was approached. Another indication of this is the fact that the poetic meters in which Apollo's answers were composed vary quite a bit. Some are metrically simple and others are complex.

Before the responses were inscribed back home, they would have been publicly recited to the assembly by the ambassador. It looks as if “Apollo” realized that not every ambassador had the same performative talents and gave some replies that were easy to recite and other replies that were more complex but also more performatively impressive.

Oenomaus’ cynicism aside, the personnel at Claros needn’t have been consciously fiddling the responses in cases like these. It may be that some enquiries at Claros were considered standard (e.g., “shall I succeed in business?”) and elicited standard answers, chosen from a bank of responses kept on hand (again, compare the dice oracles that I will discuss later in this chapter), whereas other enquiries were unusual and received closer, more personalized attention from the personnel and (as they would have understood it) from the god as well. In other words, there may have been a two-tiered system, similar to those that operated at Dodona or Delphi, where some enquiries were handled by a system similar to lot divination and others by enthusiastic prophecy. Nor does the variety of answers concerning the plague necessarily imply conscious manipulation on the part of the priests. Work on divination in many cultures has shown that diviners are apt to absorb their clients’ concerns, hopes and world-views without fully realizing that they are doing so; this inevitably affects their prophecies.

One topic remains in our examination of Claros: stories about how the Oracle was founded. In contrast to Delphi and Dodona, Claros had only one foundation myth, as far as our sources indicate. After the Epigoni had laid waste to Thebes, the victors sent spoils to Apollo at Delphi in thanks for his support. Among the gifts were the Theban seer Tiresias and his daughter, Manto (literally, “Prophetess”). Tiresias died either on the way to Delphi or soon after arriving there, but according to one version of her story, Manto lived on and eventually married a man named Rhacius, who came from the area around Colophon and who took her home with him when he returned. Once in Asia Minor, Manto felt homesick and named the place where they had settled “Claros,” a word that echoes the Greek word for “weep” (Hesiod fr. 214 Most; *Epigoni* fr. 4 West; Apollodorus, *Library* 3.7.4; Pausanias 7.3.1–2).

Manto bore a son named Mopsus – whether his real father was Rhacius or Apollo depends on the version of the myth you read. We hear no stories about Manto herself prophesying, but her son did follow in the family business. Most famously, when some of the Greeks passed through Claros on their way home from the Trojan War, Calchas challenged Mopsus to a divining contest. Hesiod tells us that the test was to figure out exactly how many figs hung on a certain tree; Pherecydes says it was to predict how many piglets a pregnant sow was carrying. Either way,

Mopsus won and Calchas died – thus fulfilling an old prediction that he would expire when he met a seer greater than himself. Later, Mopsus went on to found a kingly dynasty in Cilicia and, in cooperation with another mythic prophet named Amphiloclus, establish a second oracle in the Cilician city of Mallos (Hesiod fr. 214 Most; Pherecydes *FGrH* 3F142; Parke 1985: 115–17).

Mopsus was also the name of another mythic prophet, who specialized in listening to the speech of birds. This one came from the area around Dodona and accompanied the Argonauts on their journey. Both characters show up already in early archaic poetry. What look to be earlier versions of the name also appear in a Hittite inscription from the early first millennium, a Luwian-Phoenician inscription of the seventh century BCE and in Linear B, an early form of Greek that pre-dates the Homeric poems by at least five hundred years. It is possible that *mopsus* or some variation of it originally meant “prophet,” or designated a particular line of prophets, which eventually crystallized, in Greece, into two distinct mythological figures (Burkert 1992: 52–3).

Generally, then, the Clarian foundation story as we have it is rather vague. The main characters are somewhat generic: a woman named “Prophetess” and her son, whose name seems to mark him as a prophet as well. We hear nothing about how, precisely, Mopsus established the Oracle. There is no Python that had to be battled, no Earth-goddess to overcome, no sacred tree for doves to discover. This silence may be just an accident – perhaps the fuller story simply does not survive. But it may also reflect the relative unimportance of Claros during the archaic period, when stories about oracles and how they were established were elaborated upon and canonized by Greek poets. It is interesting that what little we know about the two Greek prophets named Mopsus is tied to either Delphi or Dodona, in fact; this looks like an attempt to validate prophets who entered the Greek mythic corpus from outside. By the time Claros rose to greater prominence during the imperial age, it was too late to embroider its foundation story very much. The genealogies, deeds and interactions of the great mythic heroes were firmly set; the system was nearly closed.

### *Didyma*

Didyma’s myth is probably the strangest of all oracular foundation myths. We approach something like a complete version only in late antiquity, but we know that the core elements went back at least to the Hellenistic period. Pieced together, it runs like this. A certain Delphian man named Democles had an exceptionally handsome 13-year-old son



named Smicrus ("Small"). In accordance with an oracle from Apollo, Democlus sailed with Smicrus to Miletus. When he got ready to depart for home again, however, Democlus carelessly left his son behind on the seashore. A kindly goatherd, Eritharsus, adopted the boy and raised him among his own sons.

One day, when the boys were out herding, they spotted a beautiful swan and wrapped it in a cloak, intending to take it home to their father as a gift. But a competition arose over who would actually present the gift to Eritharsus, in the course of which the cloak was thrown back, revealing not a swan but the goddess Leucothea. Flattered by the boys' competition over her, Leucothea asked them to establish athletic contests (that is, formalized competitions) in her honor. This part of the story looks to be about growing up – Leucothea is a goddess associated elsewhere in Greece with rituals of male maturation, as are athletic contests. Smicrus' age and his name, which mark him as someone young, suggest that he was always a character in this part of the story.

But the story doesn't end there. Upon maturity, Smicrus married the daughter of a prominent Milesian citizen and sired a son, Branchus, who like his father was exceptionally handsome. Branchus attracted the attention of Apollo and in return for his favors received the gift of prophecy from the god. Within the very woods where he first glimpsed Branchus, Apollo gave his young lover a sacred laurel branch and established him in an oracular sanctuary that came to be known as both Branchidae and Didyma. Eventually, Branchus married a local woman who already had a son named Evangelus ("Good Messenger"), and from this step-son descended a Milesian clan, the Evangelidae, who helped to run the Oracle. (Callimachus frs. 229 and *Iambi* iv fr. 194; Conon, *Narratives* 33; Varro as quoted by the scholiast to Statius, *Thebaid* 8.198; further sources and discussion at Fontenrose 1988: 106–8 and Parke 1985: 1–8.)

Clearly, there has been some mythic grafting going on. It's possible that Smicrus, a local hero associated with male maturation, was identified as the father of Branchus early on – although it's more likely that this connection was made relatively late. Particularly significant is the fact that "Smicrus" is a Greek name and "Branchus" is not. Greek mythographers, noticing that "Branchus" was similar to the Greek word for "sore throat," came up with a variant story in which Helios, not Smicrus, sired the child, impregnating the mother through her throat and burning her in the process – but the story's bizarreness only underscores how foreign his name really was to the Greeks and how likely it is, therefore, that this character originated in the Anatolian culture around Miletus (Conan, *Narratives* 33).

But however and whenever Smicrus and Branchus became father and son, the first part of the story, which rather clumsily ties Smicrus to



Delphi, is a transparent attempt to validate Didyma's line of prophets by means of what was the greater oracle. Similarly, later authors attempted to enhance Didyma's reputation by drawing it into the great mythic cycles. Men from the area around Didyma were said to have gone to Troy to fight as allies against the Greeks, and Menelaus supposedly dedicated the shield of the Trojan hero Euphorbus in Didymaeon Apollo's temple on his way home after the war. Heracles established Didyma's great altar while on his travels. An Argonaut named Erginus, who in early sources was associated with the Boeotian city of Orchomenus, later was said to come from Branchus' land (Quintus Smyrnaeus, *Posthomerica* 1.283; Diogenes Laertius 8.5; Pausanias 5.13.11; Pindar, *Olympian* 4.19–22 with Pausanias 9.37, Apollonius of Rhodes, *Argonautica* 1.187, Orphic *Argonautica* 152–3). Another myth, which claimed that Apollo's mother, Leto, had conceived him on the site of what would later become Didyma, works to the same end. The island of Delos was already well known in early antiquity as the place where Apollo had been born; Delphi was famous as the place where Apollo had established his first oracle. Didyma had to be a bit creative if it wanted to join in the game but by at least the late third century BCE it had seized on the conception story as a way to do so. An even more desperate attempt to pull Didyma into mainstream Apollonian circles is a genealogy that makes Branchus a descendent of Machaereus, a man who had killed Neoptolemus when Neoptolemus arrived in Delphi to complain about the part Apollo had played in the death of his father, Achilles (SIG<sup>3</sup> 590 = #10 in Fontenrose's catalogue; Strabo 9.3.9; cf. Fontenrose 1988: 109–10).

About Branchus himself we don't hear much more. His major accomplishment was cleansing the people of Miletus after a plague, by sprinkling them with water shaken from the leaves of a sacred laurel tree and leading them in a hymn that, at least as it has been passed down to us, is full of words that look unintelligible and therefore are often called "magical" ("*Bedu zamps chtho, plektron sphinx knaxzbi chthuptes phlegmo drops,*" as recorded by Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 5.8.48; cf. Fontenrose 1988: 109). The family who claimed Branchus as their ancestor, the Branchidae, controlled the Oracle and provided the men who prophesied there under Apollo's influence until 494 BCE, when the sanctuary was pillaged by the Persians. When the sanctuary was re-established in the 330s BCE by Alexander the Great (whom the Oracle promptly and politely declared to be the son of Zeus), it was placed under the control of the city of Miletus, rather than any single family. Women, instead of men, began serving as *manteis*, probably in imitation of the Oracles at Delphi and Dodona. Inscriptions tell us that the Oracle also relied on an official called the *prophētēs*, who was chosen by lot from among

candidates whom Miletus nominated. There were many other personnel as well, including a magistrate, two comptrollers or treasurers (*tamiai*), a *hypochrēstēs* (some sort of assistant to the person who gave the prophecy), *hydrophoroi* (girls from noble families who carried water for rituals), and a board of officials called *kosmoi* ("those who keep things in good order"). All of these offices rotated regularly among prominent Milesian families; none was held for life. There were scribes and a special building called the *chrēsmographeion* (a "place for keeping written records of oracles") where they apparently did their work. We have little idea about what most of these people actually did; we can only guess, for example, that the *prophētēs* announced the oracles after the *mantis* had delivered them (Fontenrose 1988: 78–85).

As for what happened during an oracular consultation itself, Iamblichus is our only source of information. He says that the *mantis* fasted for three days while dwelling in the innermost part of the temple and purified herself by taking baths. And then, he says:

either she is filled with divine radiance when she holds the staff that [Apollo] has given to her, or she foretells the future when she sits on an axle, or she receives the god when she dips her feet or her skirt into water or when she is affected by vapors from the water. But in any case, having been prepared and made fit by all of these things for the reception [of the god] from outside, she partakes [of the god]. (*Mysteries* 3.11)

As when he discussed Delphi, Iamblichus goes on to emphasize that each of the actions he has just described – holding the staff, sitting on the axle, touching the water or inhaling its vapors – is really just preparatory. The god (whom Iamblichus once again identifies with transcendent light) is not actually in these things. Rather, the god takes hold of the *mantis* from outside of the temple itself and indeed from outside of the human world. Behind this Neoplatonic analysis, which so carefully attempts to keep human and divine separate, we nonetheless can glimpse once again what was probably the common belief: Apollo possessed the *mantis* at Didyma enthusiastically, just as he did at Delphi and probably at Claros.

Why does Iamblichus give us three or four different preparatory actions? Are we to imagine that sometimes the *mantis* did one thing and sometimes another? Did she do all of them at each consultation? The way that the Greek is written would admit either interpretation. Joseph Fontenrose (1988: 82) argued for simultaneity: he suggested that the *mantis* held a staff while sitting on an axle and moistening her feet or the hem of her dress in the waters of the sacred spring. This has a partial parallel: the Delphic Pythia held a laurel branch while sitting on the

tripod to prophesy. Perhaps the axle (which in any case does not sound like a very comfortable seat) was part of some device that swung out over the spring, dangling the *mantis* just above its waters. But it is also possible that the procedure changed over time. We know from inscriptions that there were periods during which the sacred spring dried up, in which case the Oracle's personnel would either have had to abandon a thriving trade or come up with a new technique for bringing on the *mantis*' prophetic state.

We know very little about the appearance of the archaic temple that the Persians sacked. The remains of the Hellenistic temple that replaced it, however, are intriguing (Fontenrose 1988: 31–41, Parke 1986 (Fig. 9)). It was the third largest in the Greek world (the temples in Ephesus and Samos being first and second) and was situated within an expansive sanctuary that also enclosed the village of Didyma and the sacred grove in which Apollo had first met Branchus. After having made preliminary sacrifices, a visitor probably entered the *pronaos* (the outer room of the temple) and saw in front of him the outside of the wall of the next room – what archaeologists call the east chamber of the temple. There was no door leading directly from the *pronaos* into this east chamber; instead, the two rooms were connected by a window-like aperture, the sill of which was about five feet above the floor of the *pronaos*. Fontenrose, Parke and Günther have suggested that after the *mantis* had prophesied, the *prophētēs* stood in this window and repeated her words to the enquirers who waited below. The scribes probably wrote down both the original question and what the *prophētēs* said, perhaps providing one copy to the enquirer to carry home and preserving a second copy in the *chrēsmographeion* (Fontenrose 1988: 79–80; Parke 1986; Günther 1971: 122).

But what went on in that east chamber? It seems mainly to have been a transitional room, from which one proceeded into the *aduton* in one of two ways. The most regal manner would be to begin by moving through one of three large doors at the back of the chamber, for the adornment of which Ptolemy Theos XII and his son Ptolemy XIII had given a huge amount of ivory to Didyma (which implies that these doors could be at least glimpsed by those who stood in the *pronaos*). The doors opened onto a broad flight of 22 steps, which led downwards into the *aduton*. But there were also two narrow sets of steps, which the ancient building accounts called “labyrinths,” probably referring to the fact that they zig-zagged back upon themselves (much like stairs do today in narrow spaces). These narrower steps mirrored one another, leading from north and south sides of the east chamber down into the *aduton*. The only access from the *pronaos* to the *aduton* (if we disallow crawling through the window-like aperture into the east chamber and then descending) was

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*Figure 9* Plan of the temple at Didyma. The two underground passages leading from the *pronaos* into the *aduton* cannot be seen on this plan; they are located under the two staircases on either side of the East Chamber.  
*Source:* Joseph Fontenrose, *Didyma: Apollo's Oracle, Cult and Companions*. © 1988 The Regents of the University of California. Published by the University of California Press

provided by very narrow, vaulted, tunnel-like passages that sloped sharply beneath the two labyrinthine flights of steps; the angle of descent in these tunnels was so steep that the builders scored the marble flooring to prevent slipping. The character of these passages seems to indicate that the *aduton* was just that – a room to which, under normal circumstances, admittance was sharply restricted. In 262 CE, when the Goths invaded Didyma, most of the population took refuge in the *aduton* and even drank water from the sacred spring, but this was an extraordinary situation.

The *aduton* was impressively large – about 175 feet by 73 feet (about 53 meters by 22 meters). It included the sacred spring and (by the third century BCE) a grove of laurel trees – according to a fragment of Callimachus, these trees were descendents of the laurel branch that Apollo had once given Branchus (fr. 229; cf. *Iambi* IV fr. 194). The *aduton* also included a two-roomed structure called the *naiskos* (“little temple”). A large and famous statue of Apollo was kept just inside the *naiskos*’ doors. The *naiskos* may also have been the place where the *mantis* spent her three days of seclusion before each prophetic session. She would have needed some sort of enclosure because the *aduton* itself was never given a roof: everything within it – including the sacred spring – was completely open to the sky, as if to ensure that divine influence could easily pass into it (compare the fact that at Dodona, the oak tree was left under the open sky, surrounded perhaps only by a “wall” of tripods and cauldrons).

Although we have oracular responses from Didyma that date from as early as the seventh century BCE, and quite a few from the sixth and fifth centuries, Didyma, like Claros, rose to its highest level of fame during the later Hellenistic and imperial periods and it is from these that most of our approximately 70 surviving responses come (most have been collected and translated as an appendix to Fontenrose 1988). The Oracle’s clientele was mostly local, drawn from Miletus or other nearby parts of Asia Minor, but there were occasional enquiries from more distant lands as well, including a few from Roman emperors. Most famously, in 303 CE, the emperor Diocletian had asked the Oracle’s permission to persecute Christians – and had received it. The emperor Constantine, who had himself converted the empire to Christianity, supposedly reported that Apollo had complained to Diocletian that it was the Christians’ fault that his oracles had begun to speak false responses (Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 2.50, 54). Obviously, if Diocletian wanted oracles to start functioning well once more, he had to remove this obstacle. The emperor Julian, who briefly returned the empire to paganism during his reign (361–3 CE) and had all traces of Christian buildings near the Oracle of Didyma razed to the ground, was officially named its *prophētēs*. Although it is unlikely that he ever actually presided over a prophetic session, Julian did consult

Didyma at least once, when he asked all of the great oracles about a planned invasion of Persia in 362 CE. The oracles seemed to promise him victory; they turned out to be wrong (Fontenrose 1988: 227–8).

The most common topic of enquiry at Didyma, as at most oracles, concerned relations with the gods: should new cults be established, should old ones be refurbished? And what did certain unusual, apparently divine, occurrences mean? During the second century CE, a priestess of Demeter Thesmophoros named Alexandra, who probably came from Miletus, asked Apollo why it was that after she had taken office, the gods had begun to manifest themselves “through maidens, through women, through men and through children” more frequently than they ever had before. She also wanted to know whether this upsurge in divine epiphanies was auspicious or not. Too little of Apollo’s response remains for us to be sure what he said, other than that he reassured her there was nothing to fear, but the question itself is fascinating for several reasons (Rehm and Harder 1958: #496; cf. Lane Fox 1986: 102–4).

The first is what is meant by Alexandra’s words. The Greek text could be translated to mean either that the gods appeared *to* maidens, women, men and children (that is, appeared to them in their dreams, for example, or even perhaps directly) or that the gods appeared *in the form of* maidens, women, men and children – interacting with humans in mortal guises. It is hard to decide between the two possible meanings, especially because the first would be difficult without the second. Myths like that of Semele, who spontaneously combusted when Zeus threw off his mortal disguise and revealed his divine splendor to her, made it clear that gods would have to cloak their glamour if they wished to interact directly with humans.

Iamblichus and other intellectuals of approximately the same time as Alexandra newly confirmed this old idea, arguing that although true divinity had no discernible form (after all, it dwelt completely outside of our own, material world), it did take on forms that humans could perceive when it wished to communicate with them. In one of the oracular texts that underpinned Iamblichus’ system of beliefs, an unidentified god tells listeners that “it is for your sakes that bodies have been attached to our self-revealed epiphanies.” Other fragments from this collection of oracles said that sometimes the bodies chosen by the gods might look like a variety of things: like a fire or like a child seated on the back of a horse, for instance. Smart worshippers, according to Iamblichus, took it upon themselves to figure out which divinity was appearing at any given moment and what use could be made of the visit (*Chaldean Oracles* fr. 142; cf. frs. 143–8; Iamblichus, *Mysteria* Book 2, and Johnston 1992; on this topic see further Chapter 5).

But to return to Alexandra and her quandary. As Robin Lane Fox (1986) has noted, the imperial age was rife with reports of divine encounters; it's not surprising, then, that people in Miletus experienced them as well. What's interesting about our case is that Alexandra took the trouble to double-check what it meant by consulting Apollo at Didyma. In one sense, this follows on a long tradition of asking oracles to clarify the meaning of strange, apparently divine, signs: already in 490 BCE, Delphic Apollo had been asked to explain the appearance of a warrior wielding a plowshare on the battlefield at Marathon, for example, and according to one version of Jason's story, Jason's uncle Pelias asked Delphi to confirm the meaning of a strange dream he had had, in which the soul of his dead ancestor Phrixus had appeared – Pelias then used this information as an excuse to send Jason off in search of the Golden Fleece (Pausanias 1.32.5; Pindar, *Pythian* 4.160–4). In these and similar cases, elucidating strange manifestations fits into the broader role that oracles played in telling people how to maintain good relationships with the world of the gods and the world of the dead.

Behind Alexandra's query, however, we seem to glimpse something more. It was the sheer number of epiphanies that concerned her, rather than the meaning of any one in particular. Didyma, like Claros, had gotten into the business of answering theological questions both lofty ("Was Christ a god or a man?" = #49 Fontenrose) and more practically oriented ("Why are some oracles no longer working?" as implied by Fontenrose ##47 and 48, taken from Porphyry by way of Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel* 204c–205a). In an age when new gods and new means of worshipping them were entering the Roman world in even greater numbers than before, it must have been reassuring to know that you could turn to one of the oldest and best known of them, Apollo, in one of the temples where he had held court for so many centuries, and have things straightened out.

### *Incubation Oracles*

There were more oracles in the ancient Greek world than I can discuss in two chapters, but I will briefly consider some that operated differently from those I have already looked at, starting with incubation oracles – that is, oracles in which enquirers slept in the precincts of gods or heroes and waited for them to visit their dreams. On such occasions the gods and heroes were, as Philostratus the Athenian put it, "clearly manifest" to humans (*Life of Apollonius* 1.7). For the enquirers, these encounters must

have seemed much more intimate than what usually happened at Delphi, Dodona, Claros or Didyma. Notably, the gods to whom many incubation oracles were dedicated, including Asclepius, Podalirius, Calchas and Amphiaraus, once had been mortals themselves, according to myth. This undoubtedly encouraged a greater feeling of closeness than a human could ever imagine having with Apollo or Zeus.

Although many sorts of concerns could be addressed at incubation oracles, cures were the specialty of most of them. The most famous healing oracles were those devoted to Asclepius at Epidaurus, Pergamum and elsewhere. His son Podalirius, who had practiced medicine at the Trojan War, had an incubation oracle as well, in Daunia on the east coast of Italy. Near Podalirius' oracle was a stream whose waters cured the animals who bathed in it. Asclepius' daughters Hygeia ("Health") and Panacea ("All-Cure") were worshipped at other incubation oracles alongside their father or other healing figures (Lycophron, *Alexandra* 1050 with scholiast; Strabo 6.3.9).

But not all incubation oracles that specialized in healing centered on figures who were famous as healers in myth – Amphiaraus' oracle, which I will discuss below, is a prime example. One wonders, therefore, why oracles delivered through dreams had a particularly strong connection with healing even when their operators did not. Part of the answer, once more, may lie in the sort of divinities who operated these oracles: people may have expected gods who had once been mortal to be more readily sympathetic to the pains of the body – could Apollo ever really understand what it was like to be blind or lame or plagued with boils? Other, non-medical concerns that are occasionally connected with incubation oracles similarly focused on very personal human problems. The stelae erected at Epidaurus praise the god for helping a servant who had broken his master's favorite goblet; having asked Asclepius for help and gone to sleep, he found the goblet mended in the morning. A father whose son had become lost while swimming asked for help and received advice in a dream about where to find the boy (*IG IV*<sup>2</sup>, 1 nos. 121–2 A, 10 and B, 24). Although Croesus consulted the Amphiareion when he made his important decision about whether to invade Persia, there is little evidence that incubation oracles in general regularly gave advice to cities in political or military matters, as Delphi did, for example.

But perhaps we should also look to a broader Greek belief that, as Pindar puts it:

[the soul] slumbers while the limbs are active,  
but it reveals approaching events – both pleasant and unpleasant – in  
many dreams to those who sleep. (fr. 131b)



In other words, the body and soul are separate entities that work in shifts rather than in tandem. While the body is active – while the person is awake – the body is in control. While the soul is active – while a sleeping person dreams – the body is, arguably, more open to divine ministrations. Some of the tales told about miraculous dream cures at Epidaurus certainly suggest procedures that nowadays would be performed only “while the soul was asleep” – that is, under anesthesia:

A man with an abscess in his abdomen. When asleep in the temple he saw a dream. It seemed to him that the god ordered the servants who accompanied him to grip [the man] and hold him tightly so that [the god] could cut open his abdomen. The man tried to get away, but they gripped him and bound him to a door-knocker. Thereupon Asclepius cut his belly open, removed the abscess, and, after having stitched him up again, released him from his bonds. Whereupon he walked out sound, but the floor of the [sleeping chamber] was covered with blood. (*IG IV*<sup>2</sup>, 1 nos. 121–2, B 27; trans. Edelstein)

In other cases, the patient dreamt that dogs or snakes (animals considered sacred to healing gods) healed the wounded area by licking it. (e.g., *IG IV*<sup>2</sup>, 1 nos. 121–2, A 17 and 20, B 26; cf. Aristophanes, *Amphiaraios* fr. 28 Kassel-Austin).

Other dreams were less sensational: the god might simply give the patient instructions to follow when he or she awoke. Aelius Aristides, a famous hypochondriac of the second century CE who spent immense amounts of time sleeping in Asclepius’ sanctuary at Pergamum, dreamt on one occasion that the god told him to drink vinegar mixed with wormwood – the bitter herb that was used in later times to make absinthe. When Aristides awoke, he “drank more of the mixture than anyone else ever had before” and felt much better (*Sacred Orations* 2 [= 24, 473–4 Dinsdorf]). This isn’t too different from the way in which other oracles operated: the god gave instructions about what the consultant should do later.

Some of the advice handed out at incubation oracles was close to what a doctor might have told the patients anyway – drinking wormwood and vinegar is an example. Other advice was religious in nature, however. Aelius Aristides once was told to sacrifice animals to certain gods, to cross a river and throw coins on its bank, and to offer his ring to the healing god Telesphorus (*Sacred Orations* 48. 27). In fact, what we might understand as two completely different methods of healing were considered complementary at many of these shrines: some incubation oracles had a staff of physicians on hand to help enquirers carry out the gods’ orders or to supplement divine advice with their own diagnoses.



*Figure 10* Photo of the Amphiareion in Oropus, standing at the corner of the stoa, looking southeast along a line of statue pedestals, toward remains of the main temple, in the center of the photo. Taken by the author

The incubation oracles dedicated to Asclepius and his children have received a lot of attention from scholars. Another incubation oracle that was prominent but which is less familiar nowadays is that of Amphiaraus, a mythical prophet and king of Argos (Fig. 10). According to the story, while returning from a battle in Thebes, Amphiaraus was murderously pursued by the Theban warrior Periclymenus. In the nick of time, Zeus struck the earth in front of Amphiaraus with a lightning bolt, opening up a chasm that swallowed not only the prophet but his horses, charioteer and chariot as well. He descended gloriously to the Underworld and became a ruler over the dead. Indeed, he even became a god, as had Asclepius himself. The place where Amphiaraus descended became the site of his incubation oracle, the Amphiareion (Aeschylus, *Seven Against Thebes* 587–8; Sophocles, *Electra* 837–41; Aristophanes, *Amphiaraus* frs. 28 and 33 Kassel-Austin; Philostratus the Lemnian, *Imagines* 1.27, Philostratus the Athenian, *Heroicus* 17.1; Apollodorus, *Library* 3.6.8; Pausanias 8.2.4; Cicero, *Divination* 1.40).

But the question is, where, exactly, did the earth open up? The Thebans claimed it was in their territory, and it is possible that in early days, the

Amphiareion was in fact located in the city of Cnopia, near Thebes. It was apparently a Theban Amphiareion that Croesus consulted when he made his famous test of the great oracles, for Herodotus tells us that Croesus' thank-offering to the god was exhibited in a Theban temple. By the late fifth century, however, the Amphiareion was located in Oropus, on the border between Attica and Boeotia. This area was continually fought over by Athens, Eretria and Thebes, and later on by Alexander the Great and various Romans. The political winds that blew Oropus this way and that also affected the fortunes of the sanctuary (Herodotus 1.52; Strabo 9.3.10; Pausanias 1.34; cf. Schachter 1981 and Petropoulou 1981).

It was during one of Oropus' short-lived periods of independence, from 387 to 338 BCE, that the Amphiareion really began to thrive, adding athletic games to its attractions, which also included a theater and an extraordinary *clepsydra* (water-clock). During another period of independence, stretching from the early third century BCE until the Roman occupation of Greece in 146 BCE, the sanctuary flourished again. People visited from all over the world and many of them made generous donations that were used to beautify the site. Statues of important benefactors, such as King Ptolemy IV Philopator and his wife Queen Arsinoe, were erected within the sanctuary. Famous poets and actors offered to entertain there free of charge. After 146, it is unclear how well the Oracle itself fared, but we do know that the Romans supported the athletic games, which suggests the Oracle would have been cared for as well.

What we know about the procedure for consulting Amphiaraus suggests that it was similar to that used at other incubation oracles. Although consultation may have originally been free of charge, from at least the early fourth century the patients paid fees to enter the sanctuary and received, as receipts, lead tickets on which pictures of Amphiaraus and Hygeia were engraved. The patients purified themselves, sacrificed rams to Amphiaraus and other healing gods, and then lay down to sleep on the rams' freshly flayed skins (the same process was used at the incubation oracle of Calchas in Daunia, but the ram had to be black: Strabo 6.9.3). If, when they awoke, they found that they had been cured or had received whatever oracle they sought, they threw gold and silver coins into the sanctuary's spring, from which Amphiaraus supposedly had arisen after his transformation into a god – although, since he continued to be thought of as dwelling underground, the spring was probably also imagined to be a route by which the coins could reach him. Sometimes the visitors made additional offerings as well, which were recorded in temple inventories. Many of these were of relatively little worth – small clay statuettes, small metal replicas of the body part that had been cured (both of which were for sale in stores within the sanctuary itself) or stone

reliefs on which the body part was engraved or the cure was illustrated. Other offerings, made of silver or gold, were more valuable and, as at many other sanctuaries, these were sold off periodically to sustain operations (Herodotus 8.134; Pausanias 1.34; cf. Petropoulou 1981 and Petracos 1968).

### *Trophonius*

The Oracle of Trophonius at Lebadea in western Boeotia is reminiscent of incubation oracles in certain ways: myth said that Trophonius was once a man who, like Amphiaraus, was swallowed up by the earth. After this remarkable experience, he became a god. In appearance, at least, Trophonius looked enough like Asclepius that their statues could be confused (Pausanias 9.39.3–4). As a whole, however, the Oracle of Trophonius stands out as distinctly odd, and has provoked modern comparisons with everything from necromancy to shamanistic experiences.

Although we know that the Oracle was in operation by at least the time of Euripides (*Ion* 300–2 and 404–9), detailed description of the procedure is provided only by Pausanias (9.39). The enquirer arrived at the shrine some days before he hoped to make his consultation and slept in a special building dedicated to gods called Good Fortune and Good Daemon. During this period, he bathed in a nearby river called Hercyna, whose eponymous nymph was said to have been Trophonius' daughter. He made a series of sacrifices to Trophonius and various other gods, and on each occasion a *mantis* examined the animal's entrails to determine whether Trophonius was willing yet to receive the enquirer. Rams were said to be best for this purpose and, in any case, the enquirer had to sacrifice a ram on the night he actually intended to make his consultation, to get a final reading of Trophonius' mood.

If the ram's entrails boded well, two local boys led the enquirer to the river for another bath and then anointed him. Priests escorted him from the river to a Fountain of Forgetfulness, from which he drank in order to purge his mind of extraneous matters, and then to a Fountain of Memory, from which he drank in order to remember what he was about to learn. He was allowed to look at, and worship, a special statue of Trophonius that was otherwise kept hidden.

Finally, dressed in white linen and wearing a special kind of boot, he ascended the hill on which the Oracle stood and entered a small, man-made structure that several ancient authors call a chasm or cave. Within it, he found another, smaller cave in the floor and began to lower himself into it, feet first. Supposedly, by the time he had inserted his lower legs,

a great force from below drew him swiftly and efficiently downward, into the Underworld – ancient sources call his journey a *katabasis*, or descent into Hades; more philosophically oriented accounts portray this as a process whereby the enquirer’s soul temporarily left his body altogether (Lucian, *Dialogues of the Dead* 10; Plutarch, *On the Sign of Socrates* 21–2; 590a–592e and Dicaearchus frs. 13–22, Wehrli). The enquirer encountered snakes along the way, which he propitiated with honey-cakes, and then he met Trophonius, who showed or told him the answers to his questions. When the holy man Apollonius of Tyana descended in order to ask what the most perfect form of philosophy was, Trophonius went even further, giving him a book of Pythagoras’ teachings to carry back from his journey (Philostratus the Athenian, *Life of Apollonius* 4.24 and 8.19).

The enquirer eventually resurfaced, feet first, by way of the same hole through which he had descended – although more fantastic accounts tell of enquirers returning by other subterranean paths as well, which popped out all over Boeotia and even, occasionally, scores of miles away, beyond the neighboring territories of Locri and Phocis. The priests received the enquirer, seated him on the Throne of Memory and asked him what he had learned; eventually, this information was inscribed on a tablet and displayed in the sanctuary. The enquirer had to bring relatives or friends along on his visit, for once the priests were done debriefing him, someone had to care for him until he had shaken off the paralyzing terror into which the encounter with Trophonius had thrown him. A person with grim countenance was proverbially referred to in antiquity as “having consulted Trophonius” because it was said that one couldn’t even laugh for a long time afterwards (Pausanias 9.39.12; Philostratus the Athenian, *Life of Apollonius* 8.19; Zenobius 5.61 = *Paroem. Gr.* I, 72).

At least during imperial times and probably already during the classical period, consulting Trophonius’ Oracle required one to undergo initiation into mysteries – that is, special rituals that somehow “perfected” (*telesthai*) the individual by endowing him with enhanced knowledge, introducing him to gods, compelling him to undergo extraordinary experiences, or all of these. Our details about the initiations at Trophonius’ Oracle are sketchy, but ancient authors sometimes compare them to those that were held during the Eleusinian mysteries (Bonnechère 2003a and 2003b). A few inscriptions from the imperial period mention mystery initiations at Didyma and Claros, too (Graf 2003: 246–7). In these cases, initiation was not required of all enquirers, as at the Oracle of Trophonius, but instead seems to have been used to give special people increased privileges, including the right to penetrate further into the oracular shrine – perhaps even to hear prophecies for themselves? This link between certain oracles and mystery initiations probably boils down to contact with the gods:

the more closely one expected to interact with a divinity, the more important it was to make special preparations – that is, to perfect oneself. Even Heracles recognized this: before he traveled to the Underworld to kidnap Cerberus, he had himself initiated by Demeter. (In Chapter 5, I will discuss initiation ceremonies performed by private diviners upon themselves or a collaborator in order to prepare for divinatory encounters with a god.) It is easy to see why Trophonius' Oracle would have required initiation of everyone: the whole point of the procedure was to meet Trophonius face to face (Johnston 1999: 132–3).

### *Necromancy?*

Underworld journeys to visit Trophonius might prompt one to think about necromancy – that is, consultation of the dead, those other denizens of the Underworld. From the classical period on, the Greeks, and later the Romans, loved to imagine what it would be like to call up the dead. Aeschylus portrays the barbaric Persians invoking the ghost of their dead king; Herodotus tells a story about the Corinthian tyrant Periander sending envoys to consult his dead wife at an oracle of the dead in distant Thesprotia. As time went on, the exotic and fantastical aspects of such tales grew; the Roman poet Lucan and from later antiquity the Greek novelist Heliodorus invented foreign, horrific witches who used gruesome spells to summon and then interview the souls of the dead (Aeschylus, *Persians* 598–842; Herodotus 5.92; Lucan 6.507–830; Heliodorus, *The Ethiopian Story* 6.14–15).

It must be emphasized that, in spite of the fact that the Greeks and Romans liked to *think* about necromancy, they seldom or never practiced it. We have no certain evidence that any oracle of the dead actually ever existed and, aside from a few recipes in the magical papyri from the late imperial period, which I will discuss in Chapter 5, we have little indication that necromancy was practiced privately, either. Although people did engage in rituals designed to send ghosts against their enemies (through curse tablets, for instance) and performed rituals to get rid of ghosts who were troubling them, they seem to have had no desire to call ghosts back into their own presence, even in order to obtain information that they would not otherwise have (contra Ogden 2001).

And no wonder: not only were ghosts frightening in and of themselves, but even in literature, they controlled encounters with the living at least as much as the living did. Ghosts often used such opportunities to make new demands on the living and to threaten repercussions if the demands were not met. Periander's wife asked for a grander funeral, including



a bonfire of gorgeous clothing that the flames would transfer to her in Hades. In the *Odyssey*, the ghost of Odysseus' companion Elpenor threatens to bring the anger of the gods upon Odysseus if his body is not properly buried (11.51–80). What one learned from the dead, moreover, was usually niggling. The ghost of Periander's wife tells him where a misplaced object is – the sort of thing wives do while alive. Tiresias' ghost can advise Odysseus about what to expect later in life, but then Tiresias was a prophet even when alive (*Odyssey* 11.90–151). The ghost of the Persian king actually has to ask his former courtiers what's been happening; Odysseus' dead relatives and comrades do the same.

The Greeks, in other words, had trouble even conceiving of direct contact with ghosts as either desirable or beneficial. Instead, when they needed to find something out about the world of the dead, they used Delphic Apollo, and to a lesser degree other oracular gods, as their conduits. These gods, who acted as mediating buffers in other difficult situations as well, were far more pleasant interlocutors than the dead could ever be (Johnston 1999: Ch. 3 and Johnston 2005.)

### *Flames, Mirrors and Dice*

We are still far from having exhausted the possible methods employed at ancient Greek oracles. At the Oracle of Zeus at Olympia, for instance, a technique called empyromancy was used: after making a sacrifice on the great altar, the prophet gazed at the flames and sparks that were consuming the victim and interpreted the way they sank or rose or sputtered. Athletes were especially fond of this oracle, as one might expect, given that Olympia was the site of the greatest of all athletic games, but we know that other sorts of people and cities consulted it as well. A similar technique was used at the Oracle of Apollo Ismenios in Thebes (*empura*: Hesychius and Suda s.v. *empura*; Sophocles *Antigone* 1005–11 for an extreme case; Olympia: Pindar *Olympian* 6.68–74 and 8.1–7; scholia to Pindar *Olympian* 6.111; Apollo Ismenios: Herodotus 8.134; Sophocles *Oedipus Tyrannus* 21; scholia to Euripides, *Phoenissai* 1225).

At the Oracle of Demeter in Patrai, which was consulted only by the ill, an odd combination of catoptromancy (“divination by mirror”) and hydromancy (“divination by water”) was practiced. A mirror was attached to a cord and lowered into a sacred spring just far enough that the water grazed its polished surface. Prayers were spoken, incense was burned in honor of Demeter and then the mirror was pulled back up; on its surface had been etched a portrait of the patient, either alive or dead (Pausanias 7.21.12–13). In the same breath as he describes Demeter's oracle,

Pausanias tells of another one dedicated to Apollo Thyrxus in Lycia, where enquirers gazed directly into the waters of a sacred spring and saw whatever they wished. In Taenarum there was a spring in which gazers once could see ships far away at sea – although it was ruined when a woman thoughtlessly washed her clothes in the water (Pausanias 3.25.8). Elsewhere, especially in later sources, we hear about divinatory mirror gazing, but it was only the inhabitants of Patrai who thought to combine the two – was this perhaps because the surface of their spring had at some point sunk too far below ground level to allow the simpler method practiced at Apollo Thyrxus’ sanctuary? Whatever the answer, Demeter’s oracle seems to have been famously unusual: the satirist Lucian spoofs it when he invents an oracle on the moon where a mirror lies over the top of a well. If one descends into the well (which, he adds, is not very deep at all) one can hear everything being said on earth. If one looks into the mirror, one sees all cities and nations. “I saw all my relatives,” says the narrator of Lucian’s tale, “but I can’t say for sure whether they could see me, too” (*A True Story* 1.26).

Another popular method of oracular consultation involved dice. There is a lot of evidence for it during the second century CE, particularly from southwestern Anatolia, but the technique was probably much older and more widely spread – Pausanias mentioned a dice oracle of Heracles in Achaea (7.25.10). As we know it from Anatolia, the system worked in the following way: a statue of Hermes was erected in the marketplace of a town. On the sides of these statues (which like many statues of Hermes were simple square pillars topped by the god’s head) were inscribed 56 oracles in verse, each of which was associated with a particular combination of numbers that one could obtain by rolling five dice at a time. In front of the statue was a table, on which lay *astragaloi* (four-sided dice made from sheep’s knucklebones). A passerby would pick up five *astragaloi*, roll them, note the combination of numbers they displayed and then look up the relevant oracle on the side of Hermes’ statue. Each oracle was “sponsored” by a particular divinity, whose name preceded it. Thus, rolling one six, three threes and a one, for instance, directed one to the name Heracles and the following advice: “The moment has not yet arrived, you make too much haste; do not act in vain nor like the bitch that has borne a blind puppy. Deliberate calmly and the god will lead you” (trans. Graf 2005: 88). It was up to the enquirer to figure out how these words applied to his situation, but we can imagine that freelance interpreters lingered around these spots, offering to clarify the oracle’s cryptic words for a fee.

At first glance, this method seems far from the “divine encounters” one expected to have at other oracles. No god speaks directly, no god appears



in one's dreams. There isn't even a priestess, as there was to choose lots from a jar at Delphi or Dodona.

Yet the oracles themselves are composed in the first person; someone is "talking" to the enquirer. Is it the god or goddess under whose name each oracle appears? Apparently not – for these divinities are sometimes referred to by their oracles' narrator in the third person ("blue-eyed Athena will save you"). The assignment of an oracle to a particular divinity probably meant no more than that the oracle's area of concern was under his or her control. Thus Aphrodite, who traditionally protected those who traveled at sea, heads up an oracle that promises the consultant a safe voyage. Is the narrator Hermes, under whose watchful eyes the dice were thrown? Probably not – Hermes has relatively little association with divination otherwise, and when he does, he specializes in the chance occurrence that must be interpreted (cleidonomancy). It is likelier that Hermes is present here in his familiar role as the god of merchants, who were the most frequent patrons of these oracles, and as the messenger of another god – another familiar role.

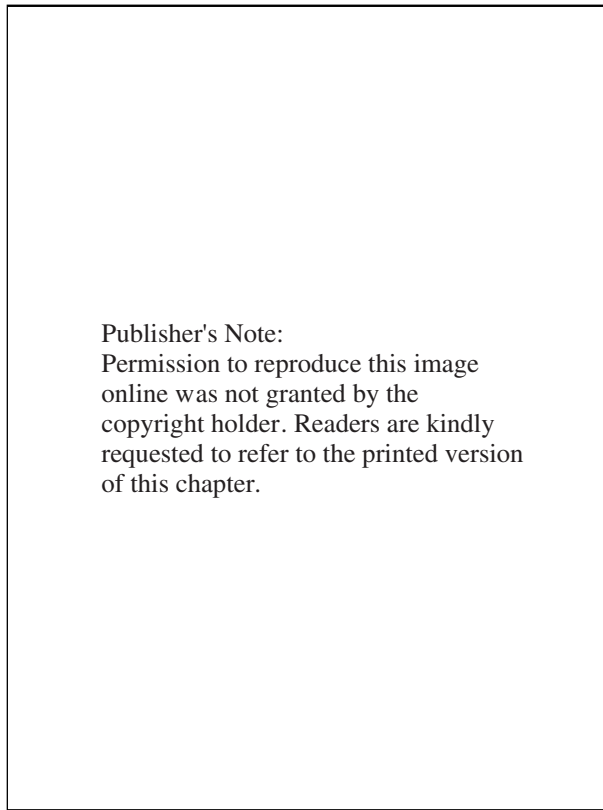
Signals within the text suggest instead that the narrator is Apollo (Graf 2005). Through these dice oracles, then, the god of Delphi, Didyma and Claros made himself readily available to merchants, whenever and wherever they needed him. The institutional qualities of the great oracles have been down-sized, in other words, in favor of accessibility – there are no priests, no grand precincts with temples, stadiums or theaters, but there is convenience. Of course these oracles, like the oracle once delivered at Claros to which Oenomaus of Gadara objected, were so full of semantic gaps as to be applicable to almost any situation, at least metaphorically. But Oenomaus and his like were the exceptions in the ancient world. Many people must have trusted the dice oracles and found them helpful, because close variations of the 56 oracles are found not only on the remains of pillars from Anatolia but also, in somewhat altered forms, in medieval oracular texts called the *Sortes Sanctorum* (Klingshirn 2002 and 2005). In this guise, the oracles have distanced themselves even further from institutional oracles insofar as there was not even a statue of Hermes to watch over the procedure of selecting among them. In technique, the use of the *Sortes Sanctorum* approach the highly portable practice of bibliomancy, which is still popular today: the enquirer allows a text that carries importance for him (the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*, the Bible, etc.) to fall open wherever it will, and then chooses a line, verse or word from it, often by closing his eyes and pointing; the word or verse is then interpreted to answer his question. Here, as so often, the line between institutional and private means of divination was liable to blurriness.

### *A Famous Scam . . . Perhaps*

We don't know what the Greek satirist Lucian thought of dice oracles and their convenient semantic gaps, but we do know that he admired his older contemporary Oenomaus, and similarly set out to expose what he considered to be a quack oracle. In doing so, ironically, Lucian ensured that the oracle's fame would survive, for his discussion, under the title *Alexander the False Prophet*, constitutes almost everything we know about the particular case.

It unfolded in a town called Abonuteichos, on the southern coast of the Black Sea. There, in the 150s CE, a charismatic man named Alexander arrived with a large, docile snake called Glycon, which he claimed was a new manifestation of Asclepius. He urged the local people to set up a cult in the god's honor, adducing in support a hitherto unknown Sibylline Oracle and a text engraved on certain bronze tablets that had just been unearthed at a temple of Apollo in nearby Chalcedon – both of which Alexander forged, according to Lucian. The sanctuary that the Abonuteichians built to receive the god thrived wonderfully, drawing clients and their money from far and wide; at times the Oracle politely replied to enquirers in their native tongues of Syrian, Celtic and Scythian (*Alexander* 51). Archaeologists have turned up statues of Glycon as far away as Phrygia (Fig. 11) and inscriptions honoring him in lands as distant as Dacia. Coins of Galatia and Bithynia represented Glycon well into the fourth century – long after Alexander himself had died. Lucian himself tells us that prominent members of the imperial aristocracy consulted the Oracle and that Glycon once sent advice to Marcus Aurelius (discussion and sources at Lane Fox 1986: 241–50 with notes).

Lucian's satirical inclinations, combined with his determination to expose what he viewed as a fraudulent cult (to say nothing of the fact that, or so Lucian claimed, Alexander had tried to murder him), warn us that we must take everything Lucian says with more than a few grains of salt. But however large the fissures may be here between reality and satire, Lucian's description provides remarkable information about how oracular frauds could be pulled off in antiquity. Even if Alexander's cult was actually on the up-and-up, the tricks that Lucian attributes to him show precisely how the wool could be pulled over people's eyes when someone chose to do so. According to Lucian, for instance, Alexander fitted out his snake with a small human mask and wig, so that it appeared to be a remarkable creature indeed – truly a new Asclepius. The snake was trained to wrap itself around Alexander's shoulders and Alexander, by covertly tugging on horse-hairs, made the mouth of the mask open and



*Figure 11* Statuette of Glycon found in Constanza (ancient Tomis) on the Black Sea. Late second or early third century CE. Now in the Muzeul de Istorie Nationala si Arheologie, Constanza. Art Archive/Muzeul de Constantza, Romania/photo Gianni Dagli Orti

close. In the semi-darkness of the temple's audience hall, this must have been an impressive sight.

Alexander used this sort of display to get the cult going. Once it was firmly in place, he began his real business and established a brisk trade in oracles. The method was broadly similar to that used with the lead tablets at Dodona: anyone with a question to ask Glycon wrote it on a scroll and rolled it up – and then sealed the scroll by stamping his or her personal imprint on a blob of wax or clay. Alexander carried the scrolls into the *aduton* of the oracle and submitted them directly to the god. Later, the scrolls were returned to their owners still sealed with – miraculously – the answers to the questions written inside.

Lucian suspects Alexander of having used either of two methods to pull off this trick. If the seal were made of wax, he slipped it off the scroll with a hot needle. Later, he would replace it in the same way. Or, he made a plaster copy of the seal, which could be used to reseal the scroll after it had been opened. Sometimes, if a question implicated the questioner in dubious behavior, Alexander would simply keep the scroll, maintaining a useful state of fear in the poor person who had submitted it.

Later, when people clamored to hear Glycon speak for himself, this was accomplished as well. A system of tubes made from cranes' windpipes was rigged from a back room of the temple into the mouth of the snake's human mask. One of Alexander's associates spoke into the tube, providing a voice for the god (more on this technique in Chapter 4). As at some other oracles, including Didyma, records were kept of the most important responses. Here, too, Alexander was on top of things, for if a response was subsequently shown to have offered bad advice, he expunged it from the record and inserted a more suitable one.

As entertaining as it is to read about these tricks, and as much as it may teach us about methods of oracular fraud, there is another reason to study Lucian's essay – a reason that makes Alexander's oracle a fitting finale to my two chapters on oracles. Lucian goes about his attack thoroughly; lurking beneath his cynical words, therefore, is one of our fullest descriptions of an institutional oracle that survives from antiquity. When carefully read, it can help to confirm or supplement what we know about other oracles. In some matters, Alexander's oracle clearly patterned itself after the norm: as at some other oracles, for example (at least ideally), the god at Abonuteichos usually spoke in hexameters. The oracle's affiliation with Asclepius follows on the popularity of that god's incubation sanctuaries in imperial Asia Minor, particularly those at Pergamum and at Aegae in Cilicia. Like Didyma and Claros during the same period, Alexander's oracle made philosophical and theological pronouncements, specifically promoting the philosophy of Pythagoras, whom Alexander claimed as an ancestor – or even as his own previous incarnation.

Other parallels are subtler. As mentioned, most visitors to Abonuteichos received their answers inside the scrolls they had submitted but a few – the wealthy and the noble – heard them straight from Glycon's mouth. This provides a broad analogy for the model I offered in the last chapter for Delphi and Dodona, according to which both lot divination and enthusiastic prophecy were available at the same shrine; it may also be the model that operated at Claros, where some answers seem to have been standard and others personalized to the specific circumstances. (Indeed, by this point in our survey of oracles, such a combination in fact begins to look like the norm.)

It's also notable that Alexander instituted mystery initiations in Glycon's sanctuary. As Lucian describes them, these were a scandalously debased imitation of the Eleusinian rites, but whatever the truth of the matter may be, the conjunction of mysteries and oracles is striking, and encourages us to take more seriously our reports of mystery initiations at Trophonius' Oracle, at Claros and at Didyma. As I suggested earlier, the link between the two phenomena probably rests on their shared promise of a close encounter with divinity; particularly in later periods, oracular sanctuaries may have become places where the divide between god and human could be most easily breached. At a time when Christianity and other revealed religions were entering the religious marketplace, this aspect of oracles must have been highly attractive. The sanctuaries of oracular gods increasingly became places not only where one expected to hear answers, but also where one might hope to encounter the gods in person. In Chapter 5, I will discuss how some magicians of the imperial period adapted these ideas, developing oracular techniques that enabled them to meet the gods – perhaps even see them face to face – not within a grand oracular temple but in their own bedrooms.

Which brings me to my final point. I began the first chapter with a series of observations about location – one of the defining characteristics of institutional oracles. Notably, Lucian portrays Alexander and his accomplice, a certain Cocconas, as having considered this issue carefully:

Cocconas thought that Chalcedon was a suitable and convenient place, for it was near Thrace and Bithynia and not too far away, either, from Asia, Galatia and all the peoples of the interior. But Alexander preferred his own hometown, saying – and this was true – that to begin a venture like theirs they needed thick-headed, foolish people, like the kind near Abonuteichos in Paphlagonia, most of whom were superstitious but also rich. (*Alexander* 9)

If the inhabitants of Abonuteichos seemed unsophisticated, it was undoubtedly because their town was at least as distant from any cultural center as Delphi and Dodona had been before their oracles were established, and similarly difficult to travel to. Compared with cosmopolitan Claros, Abonuteichos was nothing, and its people's tastes and behavior undoubtedly reflected this. But Abonuteichos' isolation and lack of sophistication didn't last long: "Hordes of people were pouring into the city, which was becoming overcrowded on account of the shrine's many visitors" (*Alexander* 49). Eventually, the city became so important that Marcus Aurelius honored it with a new name: Ionopolis, "*the City of Ionia*." The new prominence of Abonuteichos and its oracle, of course, had an attractive practical side:

Alexander earned as much as seventy or eighty thousand obols a year . . . what he received was not all used for himself alone or stored away in the treasury; he had many men around him by this time serving as assistants, ministers, collectors of information, oracle-writers, custodians of the oracle, clerks, sealers and exegetes and he divided up the loot with all of them, each proportionate to his worth. (*Alexander* 23)

In other words, if we can believe Lucian (and the archaeological evidence suggests that we can, at least on this point), then Abonuteichos offers a real-life variation of what Apollo had promised the priests of his new Delphic cult in the Homeric *Hymn to Apollo* so many centuries before: build an oracle and they will come – and *you* will never again want for food or anything else. A successful oracle would be the making of a place and its people.

It is good to leave the topic of oracles having circled back to this point, given that in the next chapter I will begin to examine its alternative: the world of the independent diviner, who may have helped to found oracles in myth, but who in real life was seldom attached to a single cult site. If oracles and the places where they were situated had a mutually beneficial relationship, each supporting the other, how did the diviner without a place garner prestige, and what was his place within his society?

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# *Freelance Divination:* *The Mantis*



“Whenever the superstitious man has a dream, he visits the dream analysts, or the diviners or the bird interpreters and asks to which god or goddess he should pray” (Theophrastus, *Characters* 16.11). Theophrastus, in this description of a man racked by superstitious fears, refers to three types of specialists who might be hired by such a person: the dream analysts (*oneirokritai*), the diviners (*manteis*) and the bird interpreters (*ornithoskopoi*) – the last of whom perhaps would be better called “interpreters of omens,” given that, in spite of their name, they didn’t necessarily restrict themselves to the avian realm. Although Theophrastus exaggerates the superstitious man’s behavior for typological effect, all three of these professionals would have been familiar in antiquity – if you had strange enough dreams, you could search out one of these without too much trouble. Nor would they have been alone: we also hear, for example, about *chrēmologoi* (readers or interpreters of earlier oracles) and “belly-talkers” (*engastrimuthoi*) who had second voices speaking out of their stomachs. Lists compiled by late antique encyclopedists multiply the possibilities even further: flour diviners, barley diviners, bowl diviners, fire diviners, and so on – although it is likely that most of these titles actually represent roles that one and the same diviner could adopt as he pleased (and also reflect the list-mania of the encyclopedists themselves). The term *mantis* was frequently used to subsume the other names in antiquity, and that is what I will use most often in this chapter as well, when there is no need to be more specific.

The ancient landscape, then, was rife not only with the institutional oracles that I examined in the last two chapters, but also with men (and sometimes women) who operated independently of the oracles, clarifying problems on the spot. As I’ll discuss at the end of this chapter, there was both a sense of cooperation and a sense of competition between the

*manteis* and the oracles. But before doing that, I will look more closely at the *manteis* themselves.

### *Becoming a Mantis*

According to one popular tradition, one became a *mantis* by being born one. In myth, many great *manteis* could trace their lineage back several generations, in fact: Mopsus, according to one story (as recounted in Chapter 3), was descended from Manto, a prophetess who was herself the daughter of the famous Theban *mantis* Tiresias (Pausanias 7.3.2); Theoclymenus was the son of Thestor, who also sired the *mantis* Calchas; somewhere in their ancestry lurked Melampus, whose descendants also included Amphiaraus, Polyidus and other seers (*Odyssey* 15.225–54). Amphiaraus himself was the father of Amphilocheus and the grandfather of Clytius, both of whom were *manteis*; in one version of the story, Amphilocheus' mother was Manto (*Odyssey* 15.248; Thucydides 2.68; Apollodorus, *Library* 3.7.7). Cutting straight to the chase, some prophets were the sons of Apollo himself: Apollo sired Mopsus upon Manto, according to one version of the story, and sired Iamus upon Evadne (Strabo 14.5.16; Pindar, *Olympian* 6).

The familial affiliations of *manteis* in myth are reflected by the guilds to which some *manteis* belonged during the historical period, which traced their origins back to eponymous mythic *manteis* – Iamids (Iamus), Melampids (Melampus) and Clytidae (Clytus), for instance. Sometimes, the guilds are better known than their mythic founders – we hear several times in our historical sources about the Telliadae, a guild that was based in Olympia, but Tellias himself is no more than a name to us (Herodotus 8.27.3–4, 9.37; cf. Bremmer 1996). Often, even when the guild of a *mantis* is mentioned, a full family pedigree is given as well; Pausanias, for instance, pauses in his description of an Iamid named Agias, who gave decisive advice during a great battle, to trace his lineage back to Tisamenus, another great Iamid seer (3.11.6–10). These guilds are typical for “intellectual” crafts in antiquity; doctors had them (e.g., the “Asclepiadae”), as did poets (e.g., the “Homeridae”).

We must be careful, however, not to leap to the conclusion that the Greeks always understood divinatory talents to be what we would nowadays call “genetically determined.” That is, although such talents might sometimes be viewed as inheritable in the same way as are blue eyes or a large nose, they could also be viewed as skills that a parent taught to a child, just as carpentry or metallurgy could be taught. Indeed, the historical guilds of *manteis* did not necessarily claim that each member was actually

descended from its eponymous founder; rather, like ancient doctors who spoke of one another figuratively as “father,” “son” or “brother,” *manteis* saw themselves as transmitting traditions within a closed circle of members that replicated the family structure so as to offer many of its benefits. The story of the seer Evenius underscores the idea that mantic skills that were *not* genetically inherited could be just as deeply ingrained as those that were: the gods blessed Evenius with *emphutos mantikē*, “inborn *mantikē*,” long after he was grown up (Herodotus 9.94.3 and see further Grottanelli 2003 on the complexities of this combination).

In the end, then, myths that arranged *manteis* into families can’t tell us as much about the nature of the talent they shared as we might hope. To go further with that, we need to look as well at how the early members of these mythic families first acquired their own talents. Saliva and similar substances frequently play a role: snakes licked the ears of Helenus, Cassandra and Melampus, after which they could understand animals and thus acquire information that others do not possess – and as Porphyry said, all of us would be able to do the same if we were to let dragons lick our ears. When Polyidus decides to take away the skills that he has taught to Glaucus, he commands Glaucus to spit into *his* mouth, implying, again, that the talent is in the saliva. Bees drop honey – which like saliva is the product of their bodies – upon the lips of the future *mantis* Iamus while he is an infant. Here, we could invoke for comparison the many stories in which bees use honey to endow humans with other remarkable speaking abilities – the poet Pindar, for example, had honey dropped upon his lips by bees, as did the justice-speaking kings of Hesiod’s acquaintance (Porphyry, *On Abstinence from Animal Food* 3.3; Apollodorus, *Library* 3.3.1–2; Pindar, *Olympian* 6.44; Hesiod, *Theogony* 81–7; Pausanias 9.23.2).

But these are not the only methods of acquiring mantic abilities. Polyidus observes one snake curing another and from this learns how to resurrect the dead – not a divinatory ability *per se*, but part of the same constellation of skills, as I’ll discuss in the next section. Hermes describes Apollo as having learned prophetic arts from Zeus; Apollo refuses to teach Hermes the same things, although he gives the younger god control of certain bee-creatures from whom he can learn a different sort of prophecy (Homeric *Hymn to Hermes* 470–2, 534 and 556). Other tales present mantic abilities as a sign of divine favor – Cassandra and Branchus receive theirs because they are beloved by Apollo – or the gods’ recompense for injuries that humans suffered on their behalf, as in the case of Evenius, who is blinded by his townsmen for fulfilling the will of the gods, and then becomes a prophet (Cassandra: Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1198–1212; Branchus: Callimachus fr. 229).

Blindness and mantic abilities often go together, in fact, although the causative pattern varies. In one version of his story, Tiresias, somewhat like Evenius, is given mantic abilities by Zeus in recompense after Hera blinds him – although in another version, the gods blind Tiresias because, as a *mantis*, he sees and reveals to mortals things that the gods want to keep secret. In a similar vein, the Thracian king and *mantis* Phineas was granted the gift of prophecy by Apollo but then was blinded by Zeus because he prophesied too clearly. Poets and singers, who in the archaic mindset are closely related to *manteis*, are sometimes blind as well – Homer being the most famous example (and note also the blind poet that we meet in *Odyssey* 8.63–4). It is tempting to explain this connection between mantic abilities and sight rather simply: if one can “see” more than others, then one must give up the ability to see in the normal way. We must be cautious, however; in one version of the story, the already blinded Tiresias receives his mantic abilities when Athena cleans out his ears, which enables him to understand the speech of the birds (Apollodorus, *Library* 3.6.6–7 and cf. Callimachus, *Hymn* 5.121–6; Phineas: Apollonius of Rhodes, *Argonautica* 2.178–93 and cf. Hesiod frs. 105 and 192 Most).

These are all interesting tales, but they don’t really get us much closer to a definite answer as to where the Greeks thought mantic abilities came from. Spitting, licking and feeding are very tangible methods of conveying traits or talents from one person to another, and thus could be understood to replicate (as closely as a bee or snake can) the biological processes through which traits and characteristics are passed from parent to child. By this interpretation, they reflect the “genetic” model mentioned above. Yet the *Hymn to Hermes* implies that mantic arts could also be taught, even to the gods, and watching one snake cure another demonstrates acquisition through learning as well. The possibility of *losing* mantic abilities that had been learned from a teacher by spitting them back into his mouth suggests, moreover, that the line between what I have been calling the “genetic” model and the “teaching-and-learning” model is far from solid – or rather, that the heuristic value of these models can take us only so far. Iamus’ story, as told by Pindar, is particularly challenging in this respect when read through to the end: his nurture by bees suggests the genetic model, but when he reaches adolescence, his father Apollo confers the mantic gift upon him – which implies that neither the bees nor his actual genetic relationship to Apollo sufficed to finish the job (Pindar, *Olympian* 6).

Thus, we have to conclude there was no single, overarching model for how a *mantis* became a *mantis* and no single concept of what sort of thing mantic ability was – a familial talent? An acquired skill? A divine gift?

The Greeks were comfortable with understanding mantic ability as any or all of these; each expressed different ideas about such things as how *manteis* organized themselves, what their relationship to the gods and nature was, and how transient mantic abilities might or might not be. The same was true of some other abilities or occupations, most notably medicine and magic, which similarly were portrayed as both learnable skills and inheritable talents. Medicine, magic and the mantic arts shared other characteristics as well – for example, a tendency to be practiced by itinerant specialists. At times, the three professions could be very close together, as we will see later in this chapter; sometimes, what the *mantis* discovered through his special skills was a way to stop the plague, for example, and it is clear that individuals who styled themselves as *manteis* might also offer services that we would call magical, such as writing curse tablets. Even a historical figure such as Epimenides (late sixth century BCE?) could be portrayed as engaging in all three of these pursuits.

But keeping the three separate for the moment, it is interesting to note that one way in which the *mantis* differed from the healer and the magic-worker was that he was much more firmly incorporated into Greek myth than they were. Outside of a few divine or semi-divine figures such as Medea, Circe and the very shadowy Dactyls, we scarcely hear of anyone who can even provisionally be called a magician in Greek myth. Figures who specialize in healing are rare as well, with the exception of a few appearances by Asclepius and his rather nebulous children. Characters performing mantic roles, in contrast, play significant parts in several of the great mythic cycles: Tiresias and Amphiaraus are busy at Thebes, Calchas at Aulis and Troy, Melampus at Pylos and Argos, just to take the most familiar examples. The adventures of Tiresias, Calchas and Melampus are referred to by the Homeric poet in a way that suggests they were already well established in the mythic cycle early on. An epic *Melampodia* was attributed to Hesiod, moreover, and *Amphiaraus' Expedition to Thebes* was attributed to Homer (Hesiod frs. 206–15 Most; cf. *Thebaid* frs. 6–9 West and *Epigoni* fr. 4 West; Pseudo-Herodotus, *Life of Homer* 9). We also should remember what was noted at the beginning of this section: mythic *manteis* tend to have fairly well-developed genealogies that are incorporated into what Fritz Graf has called the “tightly-knit network of family relations that is the hallmark of Greek heroic mythology” (Graf and Johnston 2007: 165).

Why are *manteis* and their activities central to myth in a way that healers and magic-workers are not? We could take our cue from the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski and suggest that, if myth is typically a way of ruminating about the extraordinary, then *manteis* must have been extraordinary in some fashion that healers and magic-workers were

not. But if so, their extraordinariness certainly cannot lie in any perception that they were unreal or uncommon – the mantic arts were at least as common in historical Greece as healing and more common than the sorts of magic we hear about in myth. Nor can we argue that the mantic arts were *essentially* more extraordinary than the magical ones (much less the healing ones) – most mantic rituals, indeed, were quite familiar to the average person.

Rather, I would offer a modified Malinowskian response. On the one hand, even after the rise of medicine as a profession during the early Hellenistic period, quotidian healing, at least, could be mastered by almost anyone – and after all, every household needed someone with knowledge of at least elementary techniques. Few of these elementary techniques, moreover, necessarily involved the gods – in other words, they did not carry humans outside of their own world. Most healing was no more likely to prompt elaborate mythic thinking, therefore, than were other everyday acts such as farming and fishing. Magic-workers, on the other hand, were arguably *too* extraordinary to fit easily within the world of myth – they claimed not only to be in contact with the divine (as did *manteis*), but to be able to affect it. Greek myth characteristically focuses on exactly the opposite problem – how the gods affect humans and what constitutes the proper human response to being affected. Indeed, the few magical figures of myth that I mentioned above – Circe, Medea and the Dactyls – qualify as gods, not humans, and are presented in myth as being able to affect humans very deleteriously indeed.

Mantic arts, then, fall between two extremes: they assume ongoing contact between the divine and human worlds but their purpose is to discern the gods' will and how humans might accommodate it, rather than the opposite. The mantic arts instantiate, in other words, the same world-view as do most myths, and as mythic actors, *manteis* therefore are able to explore many of the same issues as do other mythic actors: like mythic heroes, *manteis* demonstrate both the possibility of human interaction with the extraordinary and the necessity of adjusting to what those encounters bring. We might even say that, although it is in the nature of all mythic heroes to straddle the line between the divine and human, the heroic *mantis* does so in a manner that is more marked than others; his very job is to bridge the divide through which the line runs. If this is correct, then we have at least two intertwining parts of an answer as to why *manteis* were woven so firmly into the mythic network of family relations. On the one hand, if *manteis* represent the complexities of human interaction with the divine, then it is desirable for them (like mythic heroes) to be understood as the ancestors of those who listen to the myths. On the other hand, if mythic heroes themselves represent those complexities, then heroes

need *manteis* to help them negotiate the divide (even if, like Oedipus, the heroes often ignore the *manteis'* advice).

But in trying to answer the question of why *manteis* appear so often in early myth, I have digressed a bit from my main topic – how one became a *mantis* in the first place. We still need to consider what each of the two models that I have isolated – genetic and teaching – offered. Some benefits of the genetic model are implicit in my earlier remarks – it offered an opportunity to anchor a particular *mantis* within a mythic lineage. The variation of this model whereby spitting or licking transmits mantic abilities often occurs in cases where the mythic network had already positioned the *mantis* firmly within a non-mantic family and thus avoids contradicting well-established traditions – this was probably the case with Cassandra and Helenus, for example. Of course, spitting, licking and the distillation of substances such as honey onto the lips or ears also reflect the importance of the *mantis'* mouth and ears – the *mantis* hears what the gods (or animals) have poured into him and then passes it on. The point is all too clearly made in a story transmitted by Porphyry, according to which the mother of a boy who could prophesy by listening to the birds, fearing that the emperor would take her son away for his own purposes, poured urine into his ears and thus nullified his abilities (*On Abstinence from Animal Food* 3.3).

Part of the appeal of the teaching model was that it reflected reality. Even the average man could learn enough about the mantic arts to keep an eye on professionals, as Xenophon noted, and the good general knew how to read the entrails for himself on the battlefield when necessary (*The Education of Cyrus* 1.6.2; *Anabasis* 5.6.29). This exemplifies an essential characteristic of Greek religion in general – namely, that most practices could be carried out by most people, even if some were better at them than others. The *mantis*, then, was in an interesting position: he made a profession out of something that, arguably, anyone could do to some extent. But here is where the teaching model once again came in handy: the *mantis* could claim not only membership in a guild, if he liked, or descent from a famous *mantis* of myth, but special training, as well, beyond what someone like Xenophon would have had the time or inclination to acquire. Even when subsumed under the family model, as it often was in both medicine and mantic arts, the best sorts of knowledge in these professions were acquired through special learning and special apprenticeships, such as that which Glaucus served under Polyidus. Here, to follow Walter Burkert, we may also be getting a glimpse at another aspect of reality: the fact that mantic arts and so many of the skills related to them were brought into Greece by traveling practitioners from the east – outsiders who could not easily be woven into the existing family lines of myth



but who could be imagined as teachers (Burkert 1992: Ch. 2; cf. Bremmer forthcoming).

### *What Manteis Did*

If it's important to understand how *manteis* became *manteis*, it's also important to look at what they did. That last phrase has two denotations: first, in this section, I will look at what sorts of situations *manteis* were called on to address, and then in the next I will look at some of the techniques that they employed to do so.

#### *Manteis in battle*

One of the places that we meet *manteis* most frequently is the battlefield. To take just a few of many possible examples: the historian Xenophon, who was the leader of a mercenary army, famously wrote that his *mantis* could not deceive him – perhaps not a ringing endorsement of *manteis*' reputations, but proof, at least, that *manteis* were present during war (*Anabasis* 5.6.29). The Iamid Tisamenus “won five battles” for the Spartans through his divinatory skills, and his grandson Agias, who was also a *mantis*, used his gifts to help Lysander capture the Athenian fleet at Aegospotami (Herodotus 9.33.1; Pausanias 3.11.6–8). One of Tisamenus' war-time prophecies may be preserved in a recently discovered poem by Simonides (F 11 and F 14 West<sup>2</sup>). Thucydides' rather off-hand remark when describing the first stages of a battle, “and then the *manteis* brought forth the customary sacrificial animals,” underscores how commonplace – and essential – divination was in this environment; you did not start a new battle without first reading the entrails and might even delay engagement until they were propitious (Thucydides 6.69.2; cf. Xenophon, *Anabasis* 6.4–5). Alexander the Great and his generals were advised by the seer Aristander on numerous occasions (as Alex Nice has recently discussed, Aristander seems to have been known as the author of divinatory treatises and a biography of Plato as well – apparently he made good use of his spare time). In myth, too, every army had its *mantis*: Calchas served the Greeks at Troy and Helenus served the Trojans; Amphiaraus advised the Seven Against Thebes and Tiresias advised those defending the city.

One can see why seers were needed in these situations – at no time was it more important to ensure that you knew the will of the gods than when you were plotting a strategy on which victory depended. Divination, then, once again fills its common role as a means of coping with

crisis – “crisis” in its etymologically truest sense of a “turning point” at which it is imperative to make correct choices. Such responsibility carried risk, of course: the diviners in Athens were in big trouble after the failure of the Sicilian expedition that they had endorsed (Thucydides 8.1.1). And although the outcome was ultimately a happier one, the professional diviners did not cover themselves with glory in the “wooden walls” affair, either; Athens survived only because it had ignored the professionals’ advice in that case (see page 56 above).

Surprisingly perhaps to our minds, *manteis* might be present on the battlefield not only to give advice but also to fight. Already in the *Iliad* we see Calchas joining the fray, and Theban legend portrays Amphiaras as a warrior, too – after his death, Adrastus mourns the loss of “both a *mantis* and one who was good with the spear” (Pindar, *Olympian* 6.17). Historical sources mention *manteis* who fought alongside the other men – indeed, inscribed casualty lists from the classical period twice include individuals identified as *manteis* (IG I<sup>3</sup> 1147 128–9; SEG 29.361 3). Another inscription honors the Athenian Cleobolus for his work as both a *mantis* and a fighter in a naval battle against the Spartans (SEG 16.193). Xenophon describes a *mantis* as having died bravely in the front line of battle (*Hellenica* 2.4.18–19; see further Bremmer 1996).

The *mantis*, then, potentially was like any other aristocratic man, seeking honor not only through his professional art but in at least one of the arenas where noble men more typically competed. (Similarly, in myth the sons of Asclepius, who were healers in their own right, were also commanders in battle at Troy.) Some *manteis* clearly belonged to the higher echelons of society. Cleobolus was a member of a wealthy, prominent Athenian family: the orator and politician Aeschines was his nephew. The *mantis* honored in IG I<sup>3</sup> 1147 was a member of the Erechtheids, an important Athenian clan. The affiliation of the Iamids, Telliadae and Clytidae with the great panhellenic sanctuary of Zeus at Olympia conferred respectability as well, although one Iamid, Tisamenus, used his skills to reach for something he considered even more desirable: he won Spartan citizenship in return for his services as a military *mantis*, after having turned down the Spartans’ first offer of making him a leader on a par with the two Spartan kings. Melampus’ story gives the *mantis* not just an upper-class but a truly heroic aura, for he engages in cattle-raiding, the heroic activity *par excellence* (Tisamenus: Herodotus 9.33–6; Pausanias 3.11.6–9; Melampus: Hesiod fr. 37 MW; Pherecydes 3F33; cf. Bremmer 1993).

It may seem surprising that *manteis* could belong to such lofty social classes; Plato’s well-known description of *manteis* as itinerant freelancers, little better than cheats (see below, page 124) and the *Odyssey*’s inclusion of them among other demiurgic workers such as carpenters (17.383–5)

would suggest otherwise. Walter Burkert's hypothesis that the mantic arts were invigorated during the later archaic period by diviners who wandered into Greece from Near Eastern countries fits well here, given that it is hard to imagine such immigrants entering the highest ranks (Burkert 1992). Perhaps we should hypothesize that there were two (or more) different types of *manteis*, belonging to different social strata. The evidence of the old mythic cycles, which feature aristocratic seers such as Melampus and Amphiaraus, suggests that the high-status *mantis* existed from a very early period in Greece, and perhaps the less exalted *manteis* always existed as well – the *Odyssey* passage points in this direction. But two other models are also worth considering: the lower-class type of *mantis* may have emerged only during a period of significant Near Eastern influences on Greece, or some *manteis* may have lost prestige due to the increasing tendency, during the late archaic and classical periods, to combine the mantic role with some arguably less reputable pursuits that I will examine in the next section. It's worth noting, too, that the lines between reputable and less-than-reputable *manteis* were far from firm, at least by the classical period. When Sophocles' Oedipus doesn't like what he hears from Tiresias – a descendent of one of Thebes' most esteemed families – he accuses Tiresias of being a wily magician and shifty itinerant, who uses his mantic skills only to line his own pockets (*Oedipus Tyrannus* 387–9). In this case the cynical accuser turns out to be wrong, of course, but the point still suggests a fluidity between types.

### *Old problems and new solutions*

In the *Iliad*, Calchas is described as someone who “knew all things that were, the things to come and the things past” (1.70). We tend to think of divination as being particularly focused on the second of these, the future, but one of the most important jobs of the *mantis*, as well as of the institutional oracles I examined in Chapters 2 and 3, was to examine the past in order to understand its relationship to the present; by doing so, the *manteis* could then help to ensure that the future would be better. More specifically, when plague, famine or some other disaster struck, his task was to discover how humans had offended powerful entities – perhaps yesterday, perhaps last year, perhaps many years or even generations ago – and to determine what those entities now required in the way of atonement if their anger were to be lifted. In this sense, the *mantis* once again serves as a “crisis manager,” but his orientation is slightly different from that which he had in times of war. In war, his main job was to determine whether the time was right to advance against the other side, for instance; he was charged with evaluating the current situation or even, arguably,

the short-term future. In the other situations, he was something closer to an envoy, conveying the demands of the gods or the dead to those whom they were injuring. All such tasks required the *mantis* to be an expert in communication – speaking and listening to those whom other humans could not. In the next two sections, I will focus on some of the specific situations in which he was called upon.

### *Healing and related activities*

Earlier in this chapter, I drew some distinctions between healers and *manteis*. I noted that most people had some skill in everyday methods of healing and that the mantic arts tended to be more specialized. I also noted that everyday healing required little or no formalized communication with the gods whereas the mantic arts were built upon it.

Like all generalizations, these were correct only up to a point: most obviously, an ill person might pray to the gods for help or seek the aid of a local specialist who had skills beyond his or her own, and as Xenophon tells us, every well-trained general knew something about reading the entrails; a passage from Euripides' *Electra* that we will see shortly below suggests that the average aristocrat knew something as well. But healing and divination sometimes overlapped in a different, and more important, way, too. When illness struck a large enough group or for a long enough time, a *mantis* might be called on to diagnose the reason and prescribe a solution. I have already noted in Chapter 3 that the great oracles could be consulted in such situations: for example, during the plagues that swept Asia Minor in the mid-second century CE, Claros was consulted by a number of cities. According to legend, the Oracle at Delphi often was consulted under such circumstances as well. When Delphi itself suffered plague, for example, the Oracle told its ruler that he could stop it by burying a girl whom he had caused to hang herself (Plutarch *The Greek Questions* 293e–f). When plague hit Athens in the early sixth century BCE, the city consulted the Delphic Oracle and eventually was cured after it had appeased the souls of slaughtered suppliants.

And yet, here we start to draw near to the *mantis* again, for in the latter situation the Oracle advised the Athenians to call in Epimenides of Crete, who was among other things a *mantis*, and it was Epimenides who came up with the specific cure – more on that below. Abaris, a *mantis* reputed to come from the mysterious land of the Hyperboreans, wandered the world predicting plagues, famines, earthquakes and all manner of other disasters; when he visited the Spartans, he taught them how to avert the plague by offering the right kinds of sacrifices. Empedocles and Pythagoras are also said to have both predicted natural

disasters and cured plagues; Empedocles treated individuals, too, most famously raising a woman from the dead (Epimenides: Plato, *Laws* 642d4–643a1 and several later sources; Abaris: Apollonius, *Mirabilia* 4; Empedocles: fr. 101 Wright and Diodorus Siculus 8.60; Pythagoras: e.g., Porphyry, *Life of Pythagoras* 29).

Other examples could be offered, but these suffice to demonstrate the link between *mantikē* and healing. Bolton is right to caution that some of these stories were probably invented by the mid-fourth-century BCE philosopher Heraclides Ponticus to fit what was by then an established model for this sort of legendary figure – but the model had to be around if Heraclides were to imitate it (1962: 165 and see now also Bremmer 2002: Ch. 3). We hear about Epimenides’ curing of the Athenian plague half a century earlier than Heraclides, from Plato, and Empedocles’ healing is described in his own fifth-century poetry (frs. 101 and 102 Wright). Standing behind all of these historical or semi-historical figures, moreover, are two mythic healer-seers whose tales were narrated already by authors of the archaic age. Hesiod and Pherecydes tell of how Melampus cured the daughters of Proetus of a strange disease. Pherecydes also tells of how Melampus cured Iphiclus of a procreative problem – impotence? sterility? – and Hesiod seems to have known this story as well. Calchas, who served as *mantis* to the Greeks at Troy, tells them how to end the plague that has struck the army (Hesiod fr. 35 Most, Pherecydes 3F114; Pherecydes 3F33, Hesiod fr. 208 Most; *Iliad* 1.74–100).

Robert Parker has suggested that we need to divide the figure whom I have just been describing into two types. The first type (the healer-seer proper, or *iatromantis*) used his special powers of discernment to diagnose an illness’s cause and then prescribed the appropriate cure, which might take any of several forms. The second type – the “purifier” – focused more on using “magical techniques” to cure the victims of disease without too much concern for what had caused their problems (1983: 209–10). Parker concedes that already in our earliest glimpse of the healer-seer at work – Calchas – we find elements of purification: Calchas tells the Greeks to “wash off their pollution and throw it into the sea” (*Iliad* 1.314); and he also concedes that later “purifiers” such as those despised by the Hippocratic author of *On the Sacred Disease* (second half of the fifth century BCE) used diagnostic techniques that would more properly belong to healer-seers. Parker’s solution, ultimately, is to hypothesize a slow and not altogether steady fragmentation over time, beginning already in the archaic age, of what was once a single profession (healer-seer-purifier) into what we would nowadays call doctors, on the one hand, and on the other hand religious purifiers, who continued to rely heavily on their mantic talents.

It is possible that such a fragmentation into two different types did more or less occur, historically – particularly if one views the situation through the eyes of those who advertised themselves as doctors and therefore rejected “religious” or “magical” purifications in favor of what we would now call “scientific” approaches. And yet, well after the time of Hippocrates, the “father of Greek medicine,” the Greek imagination was quite happy to combine the two. Callimachus can talk of a prophet purifying a community from plague by sprinkling water from a laurel branch. Diphilus (later third century BCE) talks of Melampus curing Proetus and his daughters by “cleansing” them with fire, squills, sulfur, pitch and sea-water. And in the first century BCE, Strabo could still be shown the special stream where, the locals believed, Melampus had washed disease off the girls he treated. Stories like these, even if they have been magnified a bit by their narrative lenses, reflect the same ground-level view that we find in most other cultures: what matters to the person in trouble is not *how* he is cured – much less the philosophy that underlies the cure – but the *fact* that he is cured. Even in our own, western world, we see this attitude at work: look around any American golf course and you will see middle-aged people, educated in the traditional western way (that is to say, educated to put their trust in scientifically-based medicine), wearing copper bracelets in hopes of keeping their arthritis at bay long enough to finish the round (Callimachus fr. 194.28–31 with Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 5.8.48, II 359 St.; Diphilus fr. 126; Strabo 8.3.19).

Why does all of this matter? Why have I belabored the point that the *mantis*–healer–purifier constellation never completely broke apart – that for most ancient Greeks, these functions formed a sort of happily triangular *convivencia*? Because it leads to another important point: if what the sufferer cared about was relief from his or her problem, then the *mantis* always constituted the apex of such a triangle, even as the two other angles shifted back and forth a bit.

This may seem counter-intuitive, given that I have just suggested that what mattered most was not the means of the cure or the philosophy behind it (which arguably are represented in the *mantis*, the person who does the curing) but the cure itself (which arguably is represented by the techniques that we are calling “healing” and “purification”). Yet it is the *mantis* whose skills of discernment not only give him access to the special curative techniques he uses, but more importantly enable him to *choose* the correct technique by figuring out what had gone wrong in the first place – perhaps many years previously. As a late source says of Epimenides, “he claimed to purify people by rites from any damaging influence whatsoever, physical or mental, *and to state its cause*.” And Aristotle says, “Epimenides did not practice divination about the future,

but rather about the *obscurities of the past*.” Plato describes *manteis* who claim that they know how to heal problems that have been caused by either one’s own past misdeeds or those of one’s ancestors, by means of purifications, sacrifices, libations, incense, soothing vows or other sorts of rituals (457 *FGrH* T 4e; Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 3.17, 1418a23–6; Plato, *Republic* 364b5–365a3, quoted below, page 124).

Myth provides examples of mantic diagnosis through examination of the past as well. When asked to cure Iphiclus of sterility, Melampus sacrifices to Zeus, divides the portions of meat up among the birds, and then asks the birds for help (having acquired the ability to understand animals’ speech many years earlier, when snakes licked his ears). The birds fetch a vulture, which tells Melampus that when Iphiclus was small, the sight of his father castrating rams frightened him badly (or, alternatively, that his father had chased him with a gelding knife after catching him at some mischief). Iphiclus’ sterility had followed from this. To cure Iphiclus, Melampus had to find the gelding knife, which long ago had been stuck into a tree trunk and forgotten; scrape the rust off of its blade; mix the rust into a drink; and administer it to Iphiclus. This three-fold pattern – (1) error or transgression at some time in the past, (2) discernment of this error by the *mantis* and (3) prescription of the proper cure – is common in stories about *manteis*. The error need not be in the distant past, as it was with Iphiclus. When plague strikes the Greek camp in the first book of the *Iliad*, Achilles asks Agamemnon to seek out some “*mantis* or priest or dream interpreter” who can tell them why Apollo is angry, and how they can assuage him now. Calchas, called into service, reveals that the problem was caused by the recent kidnapping of Chryseis, the daughter of Apollo’s local priest Chryses, and Agamemnon’s refusal to return her to her father even after a large ransom had been offered. Only by redressing these wrongs will the Greeks be able to lift the god’s anger (*Iliad* 1.92–100).

Healing, then, as the *manteis* practiced it, was often a diagnostic art that looked to the past to explain the present. As a final and rather elaborate example of this pattern, let us look more closely at one of Epimenides’ most famous feats. According to tradition as related by Plutarch, the Delphic Oracle advised the Athenians to call in Epimenides from Crete in order to purify the city and thus cure it of the plague and some other problems that it was suffering – including incursions of restless ghosts. This was done after Athens’ own *manteis* had failed to find a solution. The fullest account of how, specifically, Epimenides approached the challenge comes from Diogenes Laertius, who says that Epimenides traced the city’s problems to the ghosts of some men who had been murdered after they took refuge within the precinct of the Semnai Theai (“the Revered Goddesses”). In other words, Epimenides performed a diagnosis



by identifying a problem that lay in the past. He then enacted an intriguing cure. Turning a flock of black and white sheep loose on the Areopagus near where the men had been murdered, he allowed the animals to wander wherever they pleased. As soon as any of them happened to lie down, however, he sacrificed it, and on the spot erected an altar to “the divinity of that place” (Plutarch, *Life of Solon* 12.1–4; Diogenes Laertius 1.110).

There are a lot of things left to wonder about in this story – the usual assumption is that the sheep were divinely caused to lie down (and thus be slaughtered) on the spots where the murdered men had been killed, and yet the altars that were subsequently erected are usually understood to belong to the Semnai Theai; does this reflect a connection between these particular goddesses and the dead? Leaving these problems aside, however, it is clear that Epimenides’ diagnosis actually had two steps: first he had to figure out the general cause of the problem (the murder of suppliants) and then to figure out where, exactly, to make sacrifices in order to address that problem – for which he used the wandering sheep (cf. Johnston 1999: 279–87).

Epimenides’ approach to the second part of the problem is not unparalleled – in other myths, wandering animals indicate where the gods want things to be done, and a late source that is probably indebted to earlier Athenian historians tells us that when ritual experts wished to *invoke* the dead, they would similarly lead black sheep around until they fell down, and then sacrifice them (Suda s.v. *psychagōgoi*). These tales may be variations of other ways in which supernatural entities could “speak” to *manteis* through animals, which I will discuss later in this chapter. But in the context of the current discussion, the main reason that Epimenides’ two-stage process is interesting is that it underscores both the carefully diagnostic nature of the *mantis*’ job – each cure must be designed for the particular situation – and the high degree to which the *mantis* relied on the gods or other non-human entities, such as the dead, to guide him as he crafted it.

The story of how Epimenides cured Athens also serves as a good introduction to the last series of observations I will make about *manteis* in this section of the chapter. According to Plutarch, as we saw, one way in which the anger of the dead manifested itself in Athens was through ghosts; we can describe part of what Epimenides did, then, as an exorcism. We also learn from Plutarch that while Epimenides was in town, he helped Solon, the ruler of Athens, develop and implement new funerary legislation, with an aim to making mourning customs more “moderate” than they had been and especially to making women less extreme in their lamentations – that is, the songs in which they addressed or called upon



the dead. He further established special sacrifices that were to be performed at the funerals themselves; it is hard not to understand these as being directed toward calming the dead or the divinities most closely connected to them. Finally, we learn from Plutarch that Epimenides possessed “telestic knowledge.” Usually, the word “telestic” and its cognates are associated with mystery cults – that is, cults that promised a better afterlife for those who joined them.

At least by this later period, then, Epimenides the *mantis*, the purifier and the healer of plagues had also become known as an expert in how the living should interact with the dead and prepare for death themselves. The same connection between *manteis* and the dead is suggested earlier, although more scornfully, by the statement from Plato that I have referred to before:

Begging priests and *manteis* go to the doors of the rich and convince them that by means of sacrifices and incantations they have accumulated a wealth of power from the gods, which enables them to cure any injustice committed by a person or his ancestors through pleasant festivals. Moreover, if anyone wants to harm an enemy, either justly or unjustly, he will be enabled to do so for a small cost, since the priests and *manteis* are masters of spells to invoke ghosts and spells [that use ghosts] to bind people. . . . And the priests and *manteis* display a heap of books by the poets Musaeus and Orpheus (children of the Moon and the Muses) that they use in their rituals, and they make not only individuals but whole cities believe that there are releases and purifications from unjust deeds that the living can accomplish by sacrifices and childish pleasantries, and also special rites for the dead called *teletai*, which deliver us from terrible things that await us in the other world – whereas those who do not make sacrifices suffer horribly. (Plato, *Republic* 364b5–365a3; see comments at Johnston 1999: 106 with n. 55)

Similarly, Plato elsewhere mentions “prophesying” (*prophēteusasa*) as a means of finding cures for the madness that besets families due to ancient angers (of the dead, it would seem) – cures that depend particularly on purifications and *teletai*. And elsewhere yet again he tells of *manteis* and *teratoskopoi* (“readers of portents”) placing wax dolls on graves, at crossroads and in doorways, all of which are places where the dead were imagined to lurk. The idea was that the ghosts of the dead would enact the curses against the living that the dolls represented (*Phaedrus* 244d5–245a1, *Laws* 933a–e).

It is possible that this connection between *manteis* and the dead bespeaks nothing more than a tendency to lump together all sorts of unusual phenomena (the passage from the *Laws* further suggests that *manteis* were dealing in other sorts of magical arts as well), but we should

not be too hasty in dismissing it for this reason. I would rather suggest that the connection again points to the role of the *mantis* as an expert communicator between realms that are otherwise hard for mortals to bridge – specifically, in this case, those of the living and the dead. He might use this skill for the good of the community, as Epimenides did when he cured the plague and then again when he subsequently regulated the ways that Athenians could interact with the dead at funerals; or he might use it for ill, as the *manteis* whom Plato berates apparently did.

### *How They Did What They Did*

We now have a reasonably thorough picture of what sorts of problems the *manteis* addressed, but I still haven't said much about exactly how they did so, aside from Epimenides' remarkable techniques for ridding Athens of the plague and some vague mentions of purifications and *teletai*. The latter phenomena point more toward the curative stage of the *mantis*' work – what he did to solve a problem once he had identified it. In this section, I will look more closely instead at a few of the most common techniques that *manteis* used at an earlier stage, to either discover the source of the problem or give advice on the immediate future in hopes of avoiding a problem in the first place.

### *Reading the Entrails*

Cicero said that “nearly everyone uses entrails in divination” (*Divination* 1.10) and this was just as true for the Greeks as it was for the Romans or any other ancient people. Although we have only slight traces of the practice in the Homeric poems (*Iliad* 24.221; *Odyssey* 21.145 and 22.318–23), we see the procedure illustrated on Attic vases toward the end of the sixth century, and it is well established by the classical period. Xenophon mentions it several times as part of the standard preparation for battle, and it was familiar enough that Plato could use it as a reference point in his rather complex explanation of what the liver is and how it contributes to the physical and psychological well-being of the individual (*Timaeus* 70d–72e). The practice could also be used to excellent effect in tragic scenes: “Aegisthus scooped up the sacred entrails with his hands; the lobe of the liver was missing. As he gazed down at them, the portal veins and the bile receptacles revealed that disaster was near at hand” (Euripides, *Electra* 826–9). Aegisthus meets with a grisly end shortly thereafter – demonstrating just how accurate the entrails were (Fig. 12).

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*Figure 12* Vase painting of a warrior reading the entrails of a sacrificed animal; the youth in front of him holds the liver. The woman holds an offering bowl; the man in the striped costume is Scythian (Scythians were common in Athens at this period). Date: approximately 500 BCE. Now in the Martin von Wagner Museum der Universität Würzburg

The most common animals whose entrails were read were those most commonly sacrificed – sheep, goats, cows and pigs. This is quite logical, given that reading entrails was automatically part of any sacrificial procedure (one checked them, if for no other reason, in order to make sure that the offering was acceptable to the gods). We do once hear of a dog's entrails being read as well, although Pausanias, our source, comments on the oddity of it (6.2.4). The liver was the first and most important organ to be examined: as the passage from Euripides indicates, any abnormality found there was highly portentous. Although we have few details about how Greek *manteis* looked at the liver, evidence from Roman, Etruscan and Near Eastern sources suggests that each segment probably had specific meanings or associations with particular gods. Some of the

segments had names that reflected either their physiological function or symbolic importance: head, gates, stream, door, for example.

And yet, even if the various segments had more precise connotations, the overall reading could only be either “yes” or “no,” as far as our Greek sources indicate: either the gods accepted the sacrifice or they did not; either they said that the event that one was enquiring about would turn out well, or they did not. As practiced by the Greeks, this was not a method of divination that allowed for subtleties of meaning. It worked fine for straightforward enquiries, however, and had the advantage of easy repeatability as well: if one were reading entrails to determine, for example, whether the time was right to go ahead in battle, one could keep performing the procedure until the answer came out right. Although Xenophon says that this could be done only three times in a single day, other sources suggest that it was possible to go on almost forever (Xenophon, e.g., *Anabasis* 6.4.15–16 and 19, *Hellenica* 3.3.4 with Pritchett 1979: III, 77; Plutarch, *Life of Aemilius Paullus* 17).

Ancient thinkers were concerned with how all of this was supposed to work – how could a divine message, which by definition arose outside of the human world, end up on one of the most interior of all spaces – the organs of a mortal creature? In one way or another, a fundamental line was being crossed even more assertively than in other forms of divination. The most influential theory, which was invented by the Stoics, involved *sympatheia*. According to this, everything in the higher (divine) realms of the cosmos was connected to things here below. Given this, one need know only where to look for signs of those connections – that is, where the greater movements of the universe would be reflected in smaller things here on earth. Of course, this prompted the question of how *sympatheia* worked – what, again, were the mechanics that enabled and sustained the connections?

One answer that the Stoics apparently offered was that the gods (or *daimones*, if you didn’t want to drag the gods into these petty concerns) watched over the process. Perhaps the gods changed the relevant entrails to look the way that they needed to at the very moment of slaughter (i.e., made the connection between outside and inside on the spot), or perhaps they motivated the enquirer to choose just the right animal – that is, an animal whose entrails already looked the way they should (i.e., the connection had always been there and the gods’ job was to guide the mortal to find it). Either way, the liver and other organs were presented basically as writing tablets that divinity could use to send us messages – a metaphor that was taken a bit too far by a charlatan seer who wrote “victory of the king” backwards on his hand and then pressed it, ink still wet, onto the freshly removed liver of a sacrificial victim. The Neoplatonists developed

the sympathetic theory of divination further by positing “chains” that stretched from the highest realms of the cosmos to the lowest. These chains unified the otherwise disparate parts of the cosmos and, because of the relationships between creatures or objects on the same chain, a smart diviner could predict greater movements based on the behavior of smaller things here on earth. Each of the gods, as well as everything else, was located on one of these chains, but the gods did not *make* the sympathetic relationships work as such (Cicero, *Divination* 1.118, 2.34–9; Polyaeus, *Strategicon* 4.20; Frontinus, *Strategems and Aquaducts* 1.11.14–15; Struck 2004: 204–38).

There were also those who tried to be what we might call “scientific” about these matters. Democritus, an early proponent of what would become Epicureanism, rejected the idea that entrails were truly divinatory and argued instead that what entrails really revealed were the conditions under which the animals had lived. Good fodder? Dry pastures? If the entrails indicated that the animal had been healthy, then it was likely that the environment would be healthy for people as well and thus entrails were, indeed, predictive in the broad sense of the word. (Roman gourmands similarly believed that the climate in which an animal had grown up would affect the flavor and tenderness of the meat.) Plutarch spins a macabre variation of this idea that brings us back to divination in the stricter sense of the word: when the Sibyl died, plants sprang up from the earth where her corpse had decayed. Animals ate the plants and their entrails became prophetic (Cicero, *Divination* 1.131 = 68 A 138 DK; Horace, *Satire* 2.8.6; Plutarch, *Oracle* 398d).

Not only the entrails, but every portion of the sacrificial animal might mean something: the way that the bladder sputtered or burst as it was laid on the flames of the altar, the way that the tail curled as it was singed. These were the “things of the fire” (*empura*) that sent messages to those who knew how to read them. The Iamids made a specialty of prophesying from the way that the hide of the sacrificed animal behaved when placed on the fire or the straightness of the cuts they had made upon it. They also studied the flames themselves on the great altar at Olympia, a method of divination called empyromancy that was used at the temple of Apollo Ismenios in Thebes as well. It is fitting that so many aspects of the sacrifice should be loaded with encoded messages – after all, sacrifice is itself a means of communicating with the gods; it is only natural to expect an answer. (On ancient sources for empyromancy, see page 98.)

### *Birds and other omens*

At the opening of this chapter, I noted that ancient words literally meaning “bird interpreter” (*ornithoskopos*, *ornithokritēs*, *oiōnoskopos* or any of

several others) might better be translated as “interpreter of omens,” given that bird interpreters already had become adept in reading other portents when we see them in our earliest sources. And yet the fact that the title and cognate words survived for hundreds of years (e.g., Pausanias 9.16.1; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.5.3) suggests that birds were always perceived as one of the most important means of conveying information from the divine world to the mortal world – appropriately so, given that birds literally move between the earthly and heavenly spheres. Or to look it from a different angle, as Walter Burkert has, divination’s fascination with the behavior of birds, and especially with birds of prey, may have developed out of early humans’ realization that where there were birds, there was also food to be scavenged; watching birds was a survival strategy in the baldest terms. Indeed, as Burkert goes on to suggest, divination’s fascination with the movements of animals in general – and here we could include Epimenides’ use of sheep – may point in the same direction. Humans learn what places are safe and unsafe, productive and unproductive, significant and insignificant by watching animals – an idea close to what Democritus had suggested about entrails (Burkert 2005: 33).

Anyone could watch what the birds did and draw his or her own conclusions: Hesiod advises the farmer to “judge the bird signs” before he chooses the day on which to lead his new wife home (*Works and Days* 800–1). *Oiōnoskopeia* as an art, however, properly belonged to the *mantis*. Unfortunately, we have few details about how, exactly, the Greek *manteis* did it. Judging from what we know of *oiōnoskopeia* in the ancient Near East, Etruria and Rome, there might have been very detailed rules about where the *mantis* stood to survey the sky, in what direction he should look, and how he should divide the heavenly regions into segments (*templa*, as the Romans called them). A passing reference by Tiresias to a special place in Thebes where the *mantis* stood to perform *oiōnoskopeia* suggests that the Greeks may have followed suit, but the picture is complicated by the fact that Tiresias was blind and, as he says, could only listen to the birds’ cries; it may be that the place where he stood was “special” not so much in the sense of providing a particular vantage point as in the sense of being inherently sacred and therefore appropriate for carrying out prophetic duties. We do know, however, that Greek *oiōnoskopeia* distinguished between right and left, with right generally being positive and left negative (Sophocles, *Antigone* 998–1004; cf. Euripides, *Phoenician Women* 840 and *Bacchae* 347; right and left: e.g., Aristotle, *On the Heavens* 285a3).

The type of bird one saw made a difference. Unquestionably, the powerful birds of prey, and especially Zeus’ eagle, were at the top of the list as far as portentousness went, but even the woodpecker had its place as a bird of good omen for carpenters, hunters and those on their way to feasts.

What the bird *did* when you saw it was important as well, particularly the noises that it made and the way that it flew. In literature at least, birds could be actors in even more intricate tableaux: in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, two of Zeus' eagles swoop down upon a pregnant hare and tear her apart in front of the Greek leaders as they are on their way to Troy. Calchas duly interprets this to mean that the war will be unfulfilled for a long time (the unborn fetuses) but that the Greeks will finally triumph (the mother hare) (Pindar, *Isthmian* 6.50; Theocritus, *Idyll* 26.31; Antoninus Liberalis 11.10 and 21.5; Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 104–30).

This last example brings us back to the circumstances under which one saw birds. There were significant places where the *oiōnoskopos* could stand and wait for birds to cross his line of vision, but there were also occasions that were more significant than others, during which a bird could mean more or less than it otherwise would. The omen performed by Zeus' two eagles is described as “in the road” (*hodon*), which was always an important category; anything that happened as one set out on a journey was assumed to be full of meaning. But this point leads in turn to another one: Greek ornithomancy was usually spontaneous in nature. You could patiently wait in the sacred spot, but it was up to the gods to send you birds if they pleased – and sometimes, as in the case of the Greeks going to Troy, the gods pleased to do so when you weren't particularly expecting it. In contrast, the Romans and some other Mediterranean cultures orchestrated their bird omens. The Romans kept sacred chickens that were fed on the brink of important endeavors; if they ate greedily, things looked good. This system was obviously open to manipulation (starve a chicken long enough and you will get positive results), but it offered the advantage of being able to get an answer whenever one wished.

Many other animals could serve as conveyers of omens as well. Theophrastus' superstitious man, with whom we opened this chapter, consults the interpreter of omens (here called an *exēgētēs*) when a mouse chews through his grain sack, and skulks in fear when his path is crossed by a weasel – the ancient equivalent of our black cat. The first instance is rather ridiculous, as even the interpreter realizes (he tells the man simply to patch the sack), but other ancient sources confirm that weasels really were considered ill-omened beasts (Bettini 1998: 249–82).

Nor was it only animals that could be ominous. People – or rather their movements – could signify the will of the gods as well. Already in Homer, we find sneezes and moans interpreted as omens, and a third-century BCE authority who went by the evocative name of “Melampus” composed entire treatises on how to divine by observing bodily twitches. In the Homeric *Hymn to Hermes*, even a baby's fart can carry meaning – surely a touch of humor in this funniest of all ancient hymns, but reflecting



nonetheless the importance that could be attached to virtually any unexpected behavior of the body (*Odyssey* 17.541 and 20.105–20; Homeric *Hymn to Hermes* 293–6).

“Unexpected” is the key word; you had to hope that the person twitching or sneezing or farting wasn’t doing so intentionally, in order to mislead you. Perhaps that is why these methods focused on bodily eruptions that most people could not control. “Unexpected” is also the key-word for a related sub-type of divination known as *cledomancy*, from the word *klēdones*, or chance utterances – although the category can also include the interpretation of any chance occurrence, not just speech. Typically, the individual seeking information would be advised to listen to the next words he or she happened to hear and interpret them to suit the question. A famous instance involves Pittacus, one of the “Seven Wise Men” of early Greece, who was asked for advice by a friend who could not decide between two possible brides. Pittacus sent the friend out into the street, where boys were playing with tops. One boy said to another, “keep to your own traces!” referring to the fact that his top kept knocking into the others, and this was interpreted by Pittacus’ friend to mean that he should stick to his own “traces” (social rank) and marry the humbler of the two women. Augustine’s famous conversion experience is modeled on *cledomancy*. Sitting in the walled garden of his host’s house in Carthage, he heard a child outside, singing “pick it up and read it” – which Augustine interpreted to refer to the gospels that lay at his side. Doing so, he at last converted to Christianity. Later, Augustine was to insist that it was actually an angel he had heard, not a child (Callimachus, *Epigrams* 1; Augustine, *Confessions* 8.12.29).

A final, elaborate instance of the divinatory use of chance occurrence underscores the assumption that the gods or Fate were actually behind these “random” happenings. In Euripides’ *Ion*, a childless man named Xuthus, who has come to the Delphic Oracle seeking advice about how he might sire an heir, is told by Apollo that the first person he encounters upon leaving the temple will be his son. Xuthus encounters Ion, an orphan raised from infancy in the temple by the temple personnel, and he presumes this is a child he had once sired, drunkenly, upon a dancing girl. A neat enough ending in itself – but even neater when one knows a secret that Xuthus does not: Ion’s true father was the god himself and his true mother was Creusa, Xuthus’ apparently barren wife. Having raped Creusa many years earlier and left her to abandon the baby out of shame, Apollo has finally used Xuthus’ faith in divination to effect a reunion.

Notably, the methods of divination I have just discussed could be practiced easily without a *mantis*. Pittacus may tell his friend to listen to the next voice he hears, and Apollo may tell Xuthus the same, but the



men themselves – as well as the men and women who witnessed sneezes, twitches and farts – were capable of drawing their own conclusions in most cases. Many of the methods I am surveying in this part of the chapter were adaptable to home use, but the use of chance occurrences was especially appealing in this context.

### *Observation of the heavens*

In contrast to some other ancient Mediterranean cultures, the Greeks were not very interested in divining by systematic observation of the heavens. Although farmers, sailors and others to whom the weather mattered had always watched the major heavenly bodies in order to prepare for the onset of the seasons (*Iliad* 22.30; Hesiod, *Works and Days* 417 with West's commentary), it was not until the first century BCE that the Greeks began to assemble detailed records of planetary and stellar movements with an eye to making other kinds of predictions as well. Contrast Pindar's discussion of a solar eclipse in the year 463 BCE:

Are you bringing a portent of some war,  
or the failure of crops, or a mighty snowstorm  
beyond telling, or murderous civil war,  
or the sea emptying over the plain,  
or freezing of the earth, or a wet summer  
flowing with raging rain,  
or will you flood the land and make  
a new race of men from the beginning?

(*Paean* 9.13–20, trans. William Race)

with part of a passage on lunar eclipses from an Old Babylonian list of celestial omens:

An eclipse in the evening watch is for plagues,  
An eclipse in the middle watch is for diminished economy,  
...  
The right side of the eclipse was crossed; nothing was left:  
There will be a devastating flood everywhere.  
An eclipse in the middle part; it became dark all over and  
cleared all over: The king will die; destruction of Elam.

...

(British Museum inv. 22696 obv. 1.12; trans. Rochberg 2004: 69)

Both passages work from the assumption that eclipses mean something, but only in the latter one do we see a *systematic structure* of interpretation

such as we typically associate with full-blown celestial divination and its frequent companion, astrology (that is, divination by means of observing the regular positions and movements of the heavenly bodies).

And in fact, when Greek intellectuals finally took up celestial divination and astrology in earnest, they primarily were adapting systems that had been developed by the Mesopotamians many centuries earlier and transmitted to the Greek world through Egypt. This is not the place to describe any of those systems in depth (Tamsyn Barton [1994] and Roger Beck [2006] have done this quite well), but we might pause on another interesting issue: why did the Greeks wait so long to practice systematic celestial divination by heavenly signs, given that they had adopted other eastern divinatory techniques far earlier? Cicero would have us believe that it was due to the relatively poor view of the sky that one could get in Greece, due to all the mountains: “the Assyrians, on account of the vast plains that they inhabit and the clear, open view of the sky presented to them all around, observed the paths and movements of the stars and, having made note of these, passed down to us the significance they held for each person” (*Divination* 1.2). But there is a better answer. Celestial divination as we find it in the eastern Mediterranean is a subdivision of what can be called divination by means of “omen lists.” These omen lists comprise associative pairs (predictive event/resulting event) that were patiently compiled over the course of decades – or even centuries in the case of astral phenomena, which, after all, do not change often in the course of a single observer’s life. Omen lists could focus not only on celestial occurrences but also on terrestrial happenings or even physiognomic oddities – thus, for example, they might tell us something such as “if he has a mole on his right finger: He will suffer financial loss; if there is a mole on his right thigh: He will enjoy great prosperity” (Goetze 1947: nos. 54: 8 and 54: 20). The world and everything in it, in other words, was understood to be an encoded text, waiting to be deciphered by those who had acquired and preserved the knowledge by which to do so.

And those who had acquired and preserved such knowledge were priestly scribes, working in the courts of Near Eastern kings. Greece was different in two respects: first, the level of literacy that was required for the steady compilation of extensive trans-generational lists reached Greece relatively late, and second, when literacy did reach Greece, it was not immediately used for such lists because there was no scribal culture *per se* – that is, there was no class of scholars sustained by the patronage of wealthy men, with leisure at hand for the ongoing scrutiny and steady recording of the heavenly movements. (Nor was the Greek writing system so esoteric that the development of such a class was necessary.) The *manteis* and other religious experts as we know them in Greece worked

on their feet, by and large, rather than in any surrounding resembling the royal libraries of the east. The Greek farmer might watch for Sirius to rise; another Greek startled by a sudden clap of thunder might wonder what Zeus was trying to tell him; but the early Greeks did not have texts to consult about subtler changes in the skies. The closest we come during the archaic or classical periods is the list of lucky and unlucky days compiled by Hesiod, which I discussed in Chapter 1 – and Hesiod, as we know, shows other signs of Near Eastern influence in his works.

Of course, virtually any method of divination has the potential to develop into an omen list; the liver and other entrails can be divided into sections, each of which can display myriad variations of color, texture and shape (in fact, we have liver omen lists from Mari). The difference is that a fair amount of knowledge about liver variations can be acquired by a single person within a relatively short span of time – after all, there are as many livers to inspect as there are animals at hand. The larger movements of the heavenly bodies are slow, and truly ominous occurrences, such as solar eclipses, are very rare. Whereas forms of liver divination can develop outside of a trans-generational scribal culture, then, celestial divination probably cannot.

### *Dreams*

The late antique philosopher and bishop Synesius said that dreams were open to the rich and poor alike – dream interpretation, in other words, was a form of divination that might be practiced by those without the money to hire a specialist, or by one of their friends or family members. But because it was sometimes tricky to figure out exactly what a dream meant, or even whether it was a “meaningful” dream, people might resort to a specialist. The *oneirokritēs* whom Theophrastus’ superstitious man consulted in the first paragraph of this chapter was one of them, and in the first book of the *Iliad*, Achilles listed the *oneiropolos* as one among several divinatory experts who might be able to tell the Greek army why Zeus was angry with them. Dream interpreters were also called on by Clytemnestra when she had nightmares following her murder of Agamemnon; the tyrant Hipparchus ignored dream interpreters to his fatal regret (Synesius, *On Dreams* 12.5; Aristophanes, *Wasps* 52; *Odyssey* 19.562–7; *Iliad* 1.62–4; Aeschylus, *Libation Bearers*, 21–41 and 525; Herodotus 5.56).

Just as today, some dreams were taken at face value – a dream figure might stand directly in front of or next to the dreamer and simply tell him or her what to do, as when Athena tells Nausicaa to do the laundry when she wakes up or as when a tall and stately woman tells Socrates that he will die three days later. Other dreams, however, were understood to be

symbolic and it was here, of course, that interpreters could be most useful, if they knew their art and used it properly. The Persian king Astyages' ill-fated reliance on dream interpreters began when he dreamt that his daughter urinated so profusely that she flooded all of Asia; his professional interpreters (in this case, the *magi*) told him this meant that he should marry her to a humble man. Having done so, Astyages later dreamt that his pregnant daughter gave birth to a vine that covered all of Asia; the *magi* told him that his future grandson would usurp his throne. Astyages duly plotted to kill the infant, but the baby survived, as they always do in these stories. Years later, when Astyages encountered his now-grown grandson, the *magi* adjusted their earlier interpretations and reassured Astyages that he had nothing to worry about. An incorrect interpretation this time, as it turned out, for the grandson, Cyrus, toppled Astyages – and Astyages thereupon impaled the *magi* who had failed him (*Odyssey* 6.13–40; Plato, *Crito* 44a; Herodotus 1.107–8, 120–8).

Dream interpretation might prove to be faulty, but so might the dreams themselves: the dream that Zeus sends Agamemnon at *Iliad* 2.1–75 purposefully misleads the commander into renewing battle against the Trojans at a bad time, and Penelope firmly expresses the belief that, although some dreams come through the Gate of Horn (the gate of true dreams) many others come through the Gate of Ivory (the gate of false dreams: *Odyssey* 19.559–69). The problem is characterized somewhat differently by the intellectuals, who speak of dreams that convey meaning and those that do not. The most complex articulation of this idea is found in the late antique author Macrobius, for whom some dreams were mere remnants of what had happened during the day (*enhupnia*), some were garbled images that typically occurred just on the brink of sleep (*phantasmata*) – and neither of these types of dreams were of any divinatory use. Three other types were useful, however: *oneiroi*, dreams that needed skilled interpretation; *horamata* or straightforwardly prophetic visions that the dreamer could understand on his own; and *chrematismata*, or oracular dreams in which gods gave advice (*On the Dream of Scipio* 1.3; cf. Artemidorus, *Interpretation of Dreams* 1.1–2 for virtually the same categories). Earlier, simpler versions of this system go back at least as far as the classical period and perhaps to Pythagoras, as I discussed in Chapter 1; what Macrobius calls *enhupnia* and *phantasmata* were often attributed to having drunk or eaten too heavily or of the wrong kinds of food before sleeping.

Nowadays we speak of “having” dreams, but in antiquity, people “saw” dreams or were “visited by” dreams; these phrases could be used even when the dreamer himself or herself participated in the dream. This way of expression reflects the popular idea that dreams were actual things, which came

up out of the Underworld at a god's request or, sometimes, of their own volition. (The popular connection between dreams and the earth is used to good effect by Euripides, who tells of how Gaea tried to challenge Apollo's new Delphic Oracle by giving birth to a brood of prophetic dreams: *Iphigenia in Tauris* 1252–84 and cf. Plutarch's later version of this idea at *Divine Vengeance* 566c.) Alternatively, as in the case of Nausicaa, the figure whom one saw in a dream might be a god or kindly *daimon* in disguise – Athena visited Nausicaa in the form of one of her girlfriends. To see an *undisguised* god was a special honor, and one of the boons promised by incubation oracles such as that of Asclepius that I discussed in the last chapter; we will see some further instances of meeting gods in dreams in Chapter 5. Aelius Aristides kept a log of the dream visits he received from Asclepius, what the god told him to do to cure his many illnesses, and exactly how the cures turned out.

The reality of dream figures is underscored by yet another story from Herodotus. The Persian king Xerxes dreams of a tall, noble man who stands by his side and tells him to invade Greece. Having been cautioned against this course by his advisor Artabanus, Xerxes ignores the dream, but it persists, arriving again the next night, berating the king for disregarding his words. Xerxes calls Artabanus and tells him to put on his clothes, sit on his throne, sleep in his bed, and see whether the gods send the dream to him as well. Artabanus demurs, arguing, like some of the intellectuals whose theories I sketched in Chapter 1, that dreams do not come from the gods at all but rather are remnants of what one thinks about during the day – and that, moreover, if they did come from the gods they would not be fooled by so simple a ruse as disguise – but Xerxes is insistent and Artabanus finally agrees to the experiment. Sure enough, the dream appears to Artabanus, and, angered that Artabanus has dissuaded the king from war, threatens to stick hot irons into his eyes. Upon hearing all of this from his frightened advisor the next day, Xerxes goes ahead with the invasion – which proves disastrous. The dream figure was real, but like the one that similarly appeared to Agamemnon, its advice did not mean what the dreamer hoped it would (Herodotus 7.12–18).

Professional dream interpretation of this type, which we also see in Homer, the tragedians and other authors of the classical and Hellenistic period, continued to thrive to the end of antiquity in spite of anything the intellectuals may have said about the biological origins of dreams and in spite of sometimes spectacular disasters such as the one I have just narrated (Athanassiadi 1993 and 1989–90). The private world of sleep, in which one might meet gods face to face and see oneself experiencing things that one could never experience in real life, was just too marvelous and apparently meaningful a world to be set aside. As we will see in the next

chapter, in fact, it was one of the means of divination that the independent practitioner found most adaptable and therefore most useful.

*Chresmologues, belly-talkers and oracles*

*Chrēsmologoi*, which we might translate as either “collectors of oracles” or “interpreters of oracles,” often are defined by modern scholars as people who specialize in using the results of older divinatory procedures to elucidate problems in the present. Chresmologues might also be *manteis*; the two categories, although sometimes contrasted in ancient sources, were not mutually exclusive (Aristophanes, *Birds* 521 and see Dillery 2005). Nor does the point of contrast, where a contrast is made, remain constant: we typically think of the *mantis* as operating with “new” materials (e.g., on-the-spot liver inspections and bird observations) and the chresmologue as interpreting “old” oracles delivered during an earlier period, but a passage in Pausanias (1.34.4) starts from a different assumption, explaining the chresmologue as someone who himself pronounces an oracle (in the present) and the *mantis* as someone who interprets portents. To complicate the matter further, Plato uses the similar term *chrēsmōidos* (“singer of oracles”) to indicate a prophet who is inspired in somewhat the same way as a poet would be (*Ion* 534c, *Apology* 22c, *Meno* 99c). As John Dillery shows, there are yet further terms that seem synonymous or nearly synonymous with both *chrēsmologos* and *mantis*. Moreover, we know that in at least one case – the famous case of the Delphic Oracle concerning the wooden walls, which I discussed in Chapter 2 – Athenian chresmologues argued about the correct interpretation as soon as the oracle had been delivered, not later (Herodotus 7.140–44; page 56 above).

Perhaps what we should take away from all of this is a reiteration of what I said earlier in this chapter: the religious expert, especially the freelance religious expert, could wear a lot of different hats as occasion demanded. It is with the consciousness of being somewhat artificially divisive, therefore, that I choose to concentrate here on the chresmologue’s work as an interpreter of older oracles, but it is also with the intention of foregrounding something that I have not yet considered in this book – the increasing religious significance, during the late archaic and classical periods, of texts.

By “text” I mean not only written documents, but also compositions that were transmitted orally, as was a lot of important material in ancient Greece, including poetry that taught listeners such things as how the world and the gods were created or what to expect after they had died. Indeed, some of the composers of oracle collections that were interpreted by chresmologues, such as Musaeus and Epimenides, were also credited with having

composed theogonic or eschatological poetry. The best-known tale about a chresmologue – the story of how Onomacritus was accused by Lasus, another chresmologue, of interpolating verses into a collection of Musaeus' oracles – does not make it clear whether Lasus charged Onomacritus with adding new verses to a *written* collection or, rather, adding verses as he *recited* excerpts from an orally preserved collection (Herodotus 7.6.3). Nor is it clear whether the legendary prophet Bacis, who claimed to have been inspired by the nymphs, left a written or an oral record; either way, his oracles were often invoked in the classical period. The story that Epimenides' skin was found to be tattooed with oracles after his death, and the fact that the skin was duly preserved by the Spartans for later consultation as needed, nicely overrides the distinction that we are used to making nowadays between oral and written: Epimenides had spoken the oracles while alive and then continued to "speak" them after death through writing that could not be completely separated from its author. As Dillery notes, the story also offers a unique solution to the sorts of problems represented by the story of Lasus and Onomacritus: "the *mantis* himself becomes the repository of his authentic prophecies" (Suda s.v. *Epimenides*; Dillery 2005: 182).

But in any case, interpreting oracles originally spoken by an earlier, legendary prophet such as Bacis was one way that the chresmologue could anchor his expertise in a sort of sacred past – a time when people with greater powers of discernment and closer connections to the gods were still alive. When the chresmologue used these older oracles to solve contemporary problems, then, he implicitly borrowed the prestige of legendary men (and women – the oracles of the Sibyls were also quoted by chresmologues). And yet the smart chresmologue was careful to make it clear that the oracle alone was insufficient to the task at hand: without the chresmologue's own exegetical skills, the verses would remain dead and inapplicable to contemporary problems. Aristophanes spoofs this point, presenting chresmologues who utter strings of abstruse pronouncements ("As long as the wood-bug gives off a fetid odor, when it flies; as long as the noisy bitch is forced by nature to litter blind pups, so long shall peace be forbidden") and then cap them with straightforward conclusions – typically, as one might expect from Aristophanes, conclusions that benefit the chresmologue himself. Interpretation could even be competitive, perhaps: it has been suggested that the reason Lasus charged Onomacritus with forgery was that both chresmologues had been hired by the powerful Pisistratids to elucidate the same problem (Aristophanes, *Peace* 1077–9, trans. O'Neill and cf. *Birds* 967–90; cf. Privitera 1965: 48).

The chresmologues' use of older oracles fits within a broader trend, which began in the late archaic period, of validating current behavior and



decisions by looking to ancient texts: this was the period when the poems of Orpheus were used as the basis of new mystery cults in honor of Dionysus, for example, and when the Eleusinian mysteries began claiming that legendary poets, such as Orpheus and Musaeus, had transmitted their sacred stories. Interestingly, it was especially new cults that used this means of validation. Unable to look to *ta patria* and *ta nomima* (“what our fathers did” and “what we customarily do”) to verify what they promoted, as did mainstream religious practices, upstart cults sought legitimation through affiliation with figures whose reputation as religious leaders was impeccable, and then, to eliminate any concern about whether the ideas of those figures had been properly transmitted to the new cults’ leaders, they invoked texts composed by the figures themselves (Henrichs 2002 and 2003; Graf and Johnston 2007: Ch. 6). Somewhat similarly, the chresmologues may have been competing with major oracular centers such as Delphi by staking a claim on mythic *manteis*.

Competition was not the only mode of interaction between independent diviners and institutional oracles, however. As I noted earlier in this chapter, institutional oracles sometimes advised a group to call in an independent diviner, such as Epimenides, to solve a problem, and once an oracle’s advice had been carried home, chresmologues or other specialists might be called on to interpret it. The institutional oracle and the independent diviner also overlapped insofar as famous *manteis* of myth were credited with the foundation of some oracles. Mopsus founded Claros, as I discussed in Chapter 3, and Mopsus and Amphilocheus together were said to have founded an oracle at Mallos in Cilicia. Amphiaraus was central to the establishment of the Amphiareion in Oropus, even if he cannot be said to have literally founded it – and his brother Amphilocheus was worshipped there, too (Plutarch, *Obsolescence* 434d; Strabo 14.5.16; Pausanias 1.34.3). The famous riddle contest between Mopsus and Calchas took place in Claros – not a foundational event, but one that helped to accomplish what all of these stories aimed at: lending the glamour of the heroic age to the shrine in question. Legitimation worked both ways, then: the authority of an institutional oracle might validate the work of an independent *mantis* such as Epimenides, but the *manteis* of myth helped to validate the oracles. When we remember that many mythic *manteis* came from prestigious families, this makes sense. Mythic *manteis*, like all noble heroes, left their traces on the ancient landscape and it is only natural that those left by *manteis* in particular should often have prophetic functions. The real-life *manteis* of later ages could ennoble themselves by affiliation with the family of a mythic *mantis* (the Iamids, the Melampids, etc.), but could also do so by claiming support from an oracle that itself had mythic connections.



The final topic I will discuss in this chapter took the latter route to validation, at least in later times. *Engastrimuthoi*, a term that literally translates to mean “speech-in-the-belly” or “belly-talkers,” were men and women who claimed to have *daimones* inside themselves, which either spoke out from within their hosts or commanded their hosts to speak for them. (Sometimes, the *daimones* themselves were called “belly-talkers” as well.) Belly-talkers were well-known figures by the end of the fifth century, at least in Athens, and we can probably assume that they were common elsewhere, too, given the frequency with which we encounter similar types of prophets in cultures throughout the world. Most of our ancient sources are allusive and therefore give us only sketchy information (notably, the earlier ones presume that their audiences are already quite familiar with the concept), but it is clear that, like most of the *manteis* I have discussed in this chapter, belly-talkers practiced independently of any established sanctuary or cult. Some had managers: in one story, the apostle Paul is angrily confronted by a man whose income has been ruined by Paul’s exorcism of the *daimon* from his female belly-talker. One of the belly-talkers was famous enough in classical Athens that his name, Eurycles, became a generic term for other prophets of the same type (Acts 16.16; Plato, *Sophist* 252c, Aristophanes, *Wasps* 1019–20 and the scholia to both; Lucian, *Lexiphanes* 20).

What has all of this to do with institutional oracles? Another common term for belly-talkers, at least in later times, was *pythones* – a word calqued upon the title of Apollo’s mouthpiece at Delphi, the Pythia (Plutarch, *Obsolescence* 414e). By implication, those who called themselves *pythones* were borrowing authority and glamour from one of the most famous oracles of all. And even if we cannot be sure that the term *pythones* was applied to belly-talkers in earlier periods, it is hard to believe that people did not draw the connection between the methods by which major oracles such as Delphi, Claros and Didyma worked and those of the belly-talkers. If you respected methods of divination that worked by possession but could not afford a trip out of town, why not try someone local who claimed to do much the same? The great shrines’ reputation had created a need and the belly-talkers filled it.

Or is this the right way to look at things? Joshua Katz and Katharina Volk (2000) have suggested that we should already see an allusion to belly-talkers much earlier, in Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, where the poet contrasts his own superior, “inspired” communication with the Muses with the sort of knowledge possessed by rustic shepherds who are “mere bellies” (lines 22–35). By this analysis, belly-talking would be an old form of prophecy in Greece, just as it is in other cultures. If so, Apollo’s institutional oracles may well have been formalizing and elaborating

upon something that was already well entrenched in the cultural bed-rock. Either way, we can see once again that the relationship between oracles and independent diviners is likely to have been fluid and mutually dependent, as well as competitive. The oracles had the advantage of prestige based on longevity and special location, but the independent diviners had the advantage of neighborhood convenience and greater flexibility – they could incorporate new techniques into their methods more easily than could an institution whose rituals were watched over by priests who were often appointed and supervised by a civic office. In the next chapter, when we look more closely at some independent diviners from the imperial age and later antiquity – especially those whom we might call magicians – we will see even more clearly how willing the diviner might be to change his techniques in order to perfect the art by which he made his living.

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## CHAPTER 5

# *The Mantis and the Magician*



Necromancers are those by whose incantations the dead seem to be revived, seem to prophesy and seem to answer questions. *Nekros* in Greek means dead, and *manteia* means divination. To summon the dead, blood is thrown on a corpse, because demons are said to love blood. Therefore, whenever necromancy is performed, blood is mixed with water so that the demons may be more easily summoned by the color of the blood. (Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies* 8.9.11)

Isidore, who served as the bishop of Seville during the early seventh century CE, believed that there was truth in words – quite literally. For him, uncovering the true meaning of a word was the key to understanding not only the word itself but the object or idea that the word represented. In pursuit of knowledge, therefore, he compiled an etymological encyclopedia that stretched to 20 volumes, addressing an incredible variety of topics.

Section 9 of Book 8 of this encyclopedia, from which our excerpt on necromancers comes, focuses on *magi*, a word that in antiquity covered a fairly wide range of practices, including what we would now call magic but also what we would now call divination. Isidore begins with a brief history of the art of the *magos*, including a list of famous people who had practiced it: Zoroaster, its founder; the Egyptian magicians against whom Moses and Aaron competed; Circe; the Witch of Endor (whom Isidore follows Augustine in calling a *pythoness*, that is, a “belly-talker”); and, somewhat surprisingly to our eyes, the Greek philosopher Democritus. The bulk of the discussion, however, concentrates on defining the subdivisions of the *magos*’ art and on describing the practices that it includes. Isidore, being a good encyclopedist, tries to distinguish between what he sees as performing forbidden actions (i.e., “magic”) and

supplying forbidden information (i.e., “divination”; see Klingshirn 2003), and yet the implicit message of Section 9 is that magic and divination are kindred pursuits.

And he was not alone in this view. Increasingly during antiquity, and especially from the imperial age onwards, magic and divination were frequently joined together, particularly in the tirades of Christians who railed against them. The combination stuck: the wicked witch whom we meet in Snow White’s story, for example, is an expert not only in poisons and magical transformations, but in a divinatory method called catoptromancy – that is, gaining information by gazing into a mirror. The word “sorcery,” which we now use to refer to magic of all kinds, is derived from the Roman word *sors*, a divinatory lot. The combination of magic and divination also has roots in earlier antiquity, as we saw in the last chapter: the *mantis* often boasted of other skills in addition to his divinatory ones, some of which were also credited to the *goēs*, one type of ancient magician (e.g., Plato, *Republic* 364b5–365a3). It is ironic that, as I showed in Chapter 1, the connection between magic and divination has largely been ignored by scholars of the twentieth century; as I mentioned there, the last book to examine the combination seriously and in depth, W.R. Halliday’s *Greek Divination*, made very little impression within the academy.

In the last section of this chapter, I will return to the question of why divination and magic have so often been joined together. That is not, however, the only reason that I have chosen to finish this book with a chapter on the subject. It happens that our most detailed descriptions of ancient divinatory procedures come from a corpus of writings that are usually considered “magical” – the so-called *Papyri Graecae Magicae*, or Greek magical papyri. In previous chapters I sketched somewhat broad pictures of what oracles and *manteis* did – broad by necessity, given the patchy nature of our sources. The magical texts, in contrast, give us detailed information on specific divinatory practices. Even if we have to allow for the fact that most of these texts were created within a milieu that was more culturally mixed than those of the earlier periods I have concentrated on in the rest of this book (that is, in Greco-Roman Egypt of the imperial period), we can use them to capture some feeling of how the working diviner operated. They also serve as a wonderful attestation of how pliant and malleable rituals could be – particularly divinatory rituals – and how deeply intertwined could be the two categories of divination that I have heuristically separated in this book – institutional oracles and independent divination.

But if we are to make proper use of these texts, we need to approach them from an understanding of the circumstances under which they

were composed and the people who composed them. That will be the goal of the first two sections of this chapter.

### *Magic?*

During the past few decades, a great deal of scholarly ink has been spilt over the question of how, if at all, we can divide the category of “magic” from the category of “religion” – not only in ancient Mediterranean cultures but in any culture, including those of contemporary Europe and America. From all of this learned discourse, there has emerged only one conclusion to which virtually all of us would subscribe: “magic” and its synonyms are normative terms. That is, people apply the word “magic” to practices that they consider to be abnormal or marginal – even illegal or immoral. By doing so, they set those practices in greater contrast to the practices that they consider “religious” and “normal.” Not surprisingly, “magical” practices are usually ascribed to groups that are also considered to be odd or of a dubious moral character – foreigners and women, for example.

But in fact, the practices in which magicians engage are often quite similar to those of “mainstream” religion. In the ancient Mediterranean, for example, magicians performed sacrifices, just as the average person did, and ensured that they were free from pollution before doing so, just as the average person did. As we’ll see, they also engaged in variations of some of the divinatory procedures that we have examined in the other chapters of this book. The real differences between “religious” practices and “magical” practices lie mostly in the details, and were often prompted by practical concerns: the ancient magician, who often worked in his own home or his client’s home, was likely to sacrifice a small animal instead of a large animal, or even to offer up a prefabricated pellet composed of animal fat, incense and plant material instead of an animal. He might perform his rituals on top of newly baked bricks or a freshly spread sheet of clean linen – relatively easy ways to ensure purity of environment within a domestic sphere. Other differences arose from the magician’s presumption that he knew more about how the divine world worked than the average person did: he knew the special, secret names by which a particular god liked to be invoked, for example. Like the *mantis* or the doctor, he had acquired special training and perhaps also understood himself to be part of a dynasty of earlier practitioners from whom he had inherited certain talents; the average person might practice magic in small, quotidian ways – tying a bit of coral around a baby’s neck to avert demons – but the magician was a professional.

The broad intention behind the magician's actions, however, usually was the same as that behind "religious" actions: to win the favor and therefore the cooperation of a particular god who might help the magician accomplish something. The specific goals usually were also more or less the same as those found within religious contexts: a magician might help you write a binding spell against your competitor in an athletic contest, but the poet Pindar shows us a traditional hero (Pelops) performing a traditionally religious act (prayer) to a traditional god (Poseidon) in order to squelch his opponent in a chariot race the next day (*Olympian* 1.71–87). So where is the difference? Many scholars nowadays, recognizing the permeability of any boundary we might try to set between religion and magic, try to avoid even using word "magician" or its cognates when referring to ancient phenomena. Sometimes, scholars use what they hope is a neutral term, such as "ritual practitioner."

I sympathize with these concerns, but in this chapter, I nonetheless will use the word "magician" for two reasons. The first is a desire for simplicity and brevity. Just as I used "*mantis*" in the last chapter to avoid clumsy circumlocutions, so I will use "magician" here unless there is a specific reason that I need to be more precise. The second is that the word "magician" and its cognates, with all of their modern connotations of the extraordinary, actually represent quite well one particular aspect of the professional magician's outlook in antiquity: he did not really struggle against his reputation for being somewhat odd because such a reputation enhanced his earnings, given that clients were apt to assume that oddness meant expertise (Frankfurter 1998: 225–33).

This last comment prompts another one that will help us with the materials reviewed in this chapter. Many people are used to thinking of magicians, witches and their ilk as being not only odd, but perverse – as inverting normal religious behavior by participating in such things as Black Masses, where they substitute the flesh of children for Eucharistic wafers and hang crucifixes upside down. But this sort of intentional reversal or distortion of rituals typically occurs when someone wishes to secure the help of an entity who opposes the god toward whom the given rituals are normally directed – it is the mark of the Satanist of popular imagination, for example, who believes that he pleases the Devil by mocking God with a distorted version of normal Christian worship. Outside of a dualistic religious system, this type of reversal or distortion is very uncommon precisely because there is no other god to whom a worshipper can turn – everyone in the society has to deal with the same pantheon of divinities and the only way that an individual can gain greater power, therefore, is by figuring out better ways to please, persuade or compel them. In a system that is not dualistic – and most ancient



Mediterranean religions were not – it would be surprising to find worshippers who profoundly changed methods of approaching the gods that generations of their society had found to be successful.

And indeed it was precisely the early Christians who most earnestly portrayed magic and divination as perverse and wicked (a portrayal that was itself a normativizing move). Before Christianity, ancient people might fear local magicians because they were powerful, but not usually because they were immoral or inhuman. In fact, most ancient magicians were very much like other people in one important way: they had to make a living, and constantly revised their skills to ensure that they could do so. Their rituals were oriented to suit the needs of their clients, and open to continual adaptation as they encountered more effective or more appealing methods among their colleagues or within the texts they read. “Here is another method of bowl divination,” begins one of the spells in the magical papyri. “Here is yet another method,” says the spell that follows it, and “Here is another,” says a third in the sequence (*PDM* xiv.805–55).

This willingness to try out alternative methods was not characteristic of only magicians. Other types of specialists who overlapped with magicians during earlier periods, including mystery initiators and purifiers, also adapted their methods as they saw fit: the small gold tablets inscribed by Bacchic priests for use in their private mystery initiations share a technique of production and a conceptual basis but vary quite a bit as to what their texts actually tell the soul of the deceased to do as it wanders through the Underworld (Graf and Johnston 2007). *Manteis*, many of whom were freelancers like the later magicians of the papyri, innovated as well, within the broad confines of certain basic precepts. They had to: a culture that had no trans-generational class of scribes could not develop lengthy and detailed omen lists of what absolutely everything meant, as Near Eastern cultures had, for example. When the Greek army saw eagles tear apart a pregnant hare, the seer Calchas had to draw on his interpretive creativity, as well as his training in bird divination, to elucidate the portent. The diversity of methods covered by a single divinatory rubric points in this direction, too: by at least the classical period, for example, words that literally meant “bird divination” were used to refer to the interpretation of omens such as the sudden rise of an extraordinarily strong wind (Xenophon, *Hellenica* 5.4.17 and compare 1.4.12; compare also my remarks at the beginning of Chapter 4). Mopsus, who served as *mantis* to the Argonauts, is described by Pindar as interpreting birds, lots, thunder and lightning as the company set sail (*Pythian* 4.189–201). Isidore of Seville’s neat, encyclopedic distinctions among types of divination probably never held true in the real world of Greece and Rome.

### *Texts and Their Backgrounds*

In talking about the characteristics of magicians and *manteis* in general, I have temporarily set aside the texts on which this chapter will focus – most importantly the magical papyri. What we now call the Greek magical papyri (*Papyri Graecae Magicae*, or *PGM*) are a collection of papyrus texts (or fragments of papyrus texts) that span the period between the last century BCE and the fifth century CE. These papyri were the “recipe books” of individual magicians, who copied on to them the spells that they had learned from others or read elsewhere. Some of the spells, therefore, are probably older than the pieces of papyrus on which they were written. In the late nineteenth century, the classicist Albrecht Dieterich proposed to undertake a scholarly edition of all the papyri of this sort, which were scattered throughout museums, libraries and private collections. After Dieterich’s death, his students tried to finish the task, but many of them died during World War I without completing it, either. One of them who did survive, Karl Preisendanz, eventually joined forces with other European scholars and finally brought the first volume of the *Papyri Graecae Magicae* to press in 1928; a second volume followed in 1931. In 1973 and 1974, Albert Henrichs published a second edition that corrected errors and included new material; in 1986, Hans Dieter Betz led a team of scholars that produced an English translation of the papyri in Henrich’s edition.

One important point to be derived from this bit of scholarly history is that the *PGM* is an artificial construct – in contrast to, for example, Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* or Virgil’s *Georgics*, there was no such thing as the *PGM* in antiquity and it was modern minds that decided what belonged in it. Another important point, which is often obscured by the fact that the papyri are now easily accessible in a single-volume English translation, is that individual papyri come not only from different centuries but also from different backgrounds; we must be careful not to expect – and then artificially inflict – strict consistency upon the rituals they describe; this is particularly so given the constant adaptation that spells underwent, as I described in the last section. It will be possible to build general pictures of the divinatory procedures that the papyri prescribe, but each specific instance of a procedure may differ from others.

Closely related to the Greek magical papyri, and also included in Betz’s translation, are the Demotic magical papyri (*Papyri Demoticae Magicae* or *PDM*), so called after the simplified form of Egyptian hieroglyphic writing that was used to record them. The Demotic papyri date to approximately the same period as do the Greek papyri and share other

characteristics with them; it is very likely that the men who composed the Greek papyri borrowed from those who wrote the Demotic papyri and vice versa. In this chapter, as is done in most studies of ancient magic, I will use the Greek and Demotic papyri in combination.

Our third type of source, which I am calling “theurgic,” brings us once again to the normative use of labels in antiquity. “Theurgy” and “theurgist,” which mean “divine work” and “divine worker,” were terms invented by a group of ritual practitioners that emerged during the second century CE. The terms were meant to distinguish the group from other magicians, whose practices the theurgists thought coerced or pressured the gods inappropriately. Theurgists claimed that their own rituals, in contrast, worked by the willing grace of the gods. Moreover, the theurgists claimed that whereas the magicians had practical, quotidian goals – goals that could even be considered morally unsavory, such as the infliction of sexual desire upon unwilling parties – they themselves undertook magical rituals in order to purify their souls and improve the cosmos.

Not everyone agreed with the theurgists’ self-preening representation of their arts; some critics, particularly among the early Christians, claimed there was no difference between theurgy and other forms of magic. There was some truth to this on the level of practice, even if not ideology: theurgic and non-theurgic forms of magic freely borrowed from one another. In both the magical papyri and theurgic sources, we find divinatory spells that involve “leading in the light” (*phōtagōgia*), for example. In most cases, it is hard to say which way the borrowing went, and luckily it doesn’t really matter for the issues that we will be considering. Although I will make it clear when I am using theurgic sources, I will often use them side by side with non-theurgic sources as I build pictures of the divinatory techniques under examination.

### *Changes*

Up until now in this book, I have taken relatively little notice of the different periods of Greek history from which our evidence for divinatory practices comes, for two reasons. First, there is so little evidence for many of the practices that if one did not (carefully) combine information from different periods, one would not be able to say much. Second, there is seldom any reason not to combine: in most cases, what we see of a divinatory practice in the archaic period is still what we see of it in the Hellenistic period, and usually even later. Some practices are better attested for one period or place than for others, but this may often be attributed to the vagaries of evidence – one reason that we hear a lot about

the Delphic Oracle during the classical period, for example, is that it was central to the narratives of both Herodotus and the tragedians. Some aspects of certain practices do change – Plutarch claims that as time went on, there was a trend away from poetic responses at Delphi toward responses in prose, for instance. Because there was a strong tendency toward continuity in all aspects of Greek religious practices and belief, however, I have been able to proceed in most cases so far without worrying too much about time.

But the period we are about to consider – the latter part of the imperial age and the early part of what we call late antiquity (about 100 to 500 CE) – did witness three changes that should at least be noted. The first was increasing cultural interaction. The Mediterranean Sea had always served as an ideal conduit for interaction – as I noted at several points in Chapter 4, some divinatory techniques seem to have come into Greece from Near Eastern civilizations at an early period – but extensive Roman empire-building and colonization escalated encounters among cultures and their religions. During this period, moreover, there was more conscious conceptualization of religion than there had been in earlier times. Although adoption of foreign gods and practices had always taken place, adoption now tended to be more deliberate, with greater awareness and articulation of what it implied about the religious identity of the worshipper and his or her relationship to the gods. One result was henotheism – the belief that many or all of the gods were actually manifestations of a single divinity. The most famous example of this comes from in Book 11 of Apuleius' *Golden Ass*, where Isis declares her identity with Minerva, Venus, Diana, Proserpina and many other goddesses, but we have already seen it at work at Apollo's Oracle at Claros, too, which decreed that Zeus, Hades, Helios and Dionysus were one and the same.

In the divinatory spells of magical papyri (as well as in other spells) these tendencies show up not only in the habit of calling on gods by a combination of names (for example, "Hecate-Ereschigal") but in the combining of rituals that originated in different cultures: we might find elements of what looks like a Greek technique mixed together with Egyptian or Jewish details. We should avoid becoming obsessed with disentangling these elements. Even if the creators of the spell were conscious of what they were doing when they combined, they understood the resultant spells to be coherent wholes. Identifying the cultural origin of a certain element may help us understand what value or purpose the element carried (that is, why it was incorporated into the spell), but examining it in isolation will not get us very far in understanding the spell itself.

The second important change was the increasing number of "utopian" religious systems during the period we are considering. I borrow the term

from J.Z. Smith, who uses it to describe systems that focus on the perfection of the individual soul and its eventual release from the body into a heavenly existence of some sort. In contrast, “locative” systems (to borrow another term from Smith) focus on ensuring human welfare by keeping things in order here and now: purifying oneself before entering a temple precinct, for instance, and observing laws about diet (Smith 1978: *passim*, e.g., 101–3). Given that many religions exhibit tendencies of both the locative and utopian outlooks, the distinction between them is best used as a heuristic tool rather than a measuring rod, but the model does help us to recognize changes within a system over time. In our case, we can point not only to the multiplication of soteriologically-oriented mystery cults during the period in question, to the emergence of Christianity and to the development of theurgy (which had a strong soteriological drive), but also to the sheer increase in religious options that cross-cultural encounters had provided, which meant that individuals now had a greater variety of venues through which to express themselves religiously. Most of them would always remain “Greek” or “Roman” insofar as they would continue to participate in the traditional, mainstream civic cults of the place where they lived, but in private life they could seek personal relationships with Mithras, Helios, Isis, Hermes, Apollo, Hecate and many other divinities. Quite a few of the divinatory spells of the papyri follow this trend insofar as they are intended to establish a face-to-face encounter (*sustasis*) with one of these gods, who would then give information to the magician. A related change of the time was the tendency to view individuals as sources of spiritual power, in contrast to places. Delphi, Claros and Didyma (as well as non-oracular religious centers such as Eleusis) continued to draw visitors, but people such as the theurgist Sosipatra (who was as “reliable in her predictions as any immovable oracle,” Eunapius, *Lives of the Philosophers* 469, 5–6) played a greater role than before. This had the effect of making prestigious types of divination, at least in modified forms, more readily available than if enquirers had to travel to one of the great shrines (Athanassiadi 1992; cf. Brown 1982, Smith 1978: 172–89 and Johnston 1997). Local diviners had always offered convenience, but during the period under discussion, they increasingly claimed power equal or superior to oracles as well.

Some scholars might argue that a third important change during this period was the repeated attempt to stamp out both diviners and magicians, first by Roman officials and then by Christians. The Roman emperors were nervous about predictions concerning the length of their reigns (and lives), and many forms of divination, except when practiced in the service of the emperor, therefore became capital offenses. More generally, the emperors tried to extirpate magic and divination because they recognized

that the former endowed one with power and the latter endowed one with knowledge – which in turn brought power. We hear about magical and divinatory books being burned on a number of occasions – Augustus had more than 2,000 burnt at once (Suetonius, *Augustus* 31). The Christians had an additional reason to campaign against divination: they understood it to rely on the pagan gods, whom they equated with deceptive demons (Fögen 1993; Phillips 1991).

All of this stands in contrast to a long silence in Greece and early Rome, which had no laws against divination or magic *per se*. There were laws against *harming* someone with magic, but it was the harm that mattered, rather than the means of inflicting it. Much of the reason behind this laissez-faire attitude lies, again, in the lack of a dualistic religious system: if magicians and diviners were not themselves viewed as intrinsically evil and anti-social, then why bother to persecute them? It took the Christians to get around to this. It is hard to say how much effect this really had during the periods on which we are focusing in this chapter – the large number of surviving curse tablets and magical papyri argue against it, for example, as does the fact that officials had to make *repeated* attempts to burn magical books. Like pornography, which survives all modern attempts at extirpation, ancient magic and divination seem to have been amazingly resilient.

### *Divination in Magical Texts*

And in fact there was a strong undercurrent of continuity in divinatory procedures during the periods we are studying. Our sources suggest that tried and true methods of divination such as bird observation and entrail reading continued to be practiced as before. The institutional oracles experienced ebbs and flows during the first few centuries CE, but Delphi and Didyma, for example, were in operation into the fourth century and Claros into at least the third (Athanasiasiadi 1989–90). The magical papyri themselves help attest to the survival of the oracles' high repute: when Apollo is invoked to come and prophesy to the magician in the magician's own house, for example, he is asked to "leave Mount Parnassus and the Delphic Pytho," and is praised as "Lord of Colophon" – that is, Apollo is expected to perform in the same way as he performs at Delphi and Claros even if he is in a domestic setting. When invoking Apollo, the magician must hold a branch of laurel or wear a crown of laurel, like the Pythia did, and wear white prophetic robes. When Apollo arrives, he will bring his tripod with him, making the setting even more like Delphi (PGM I.262–3, 297–9; II.64–79, 83; III.236–41 – oddly, Apollo is also called

the king of Dodona in the last passage, as if even Zeus' great oracle has now come under his sway).

What's different about these domestic invocations of Apollo is, on the one hand, scale. Instead of sacrificing a sheep before consulting Apollo, as at Delphi, the magician sacrifices something smaller, such as a white rooster or cakes made from various substances, including fragrant gums such as balsam and storax, dried fruits, honey, palm oil and wolf's eyes (the wolf was sacred to Apollo). The altars on which these offerings are burnt are correspondingly smaller as well. One reason for such miniaturization has already been mentioned: if you are performing these rituals within your own home or the home of your client, you need to keep things small. Creative adaptation is also frequent: in one case, a magnet is to be ground up and added to the mixture – perhaps on the theory that it will “attract” the god (*PGM* II.64–183, I.262–347, III.187–262; cf. Smith 1995).

On the other hand, some changes seem to reflect the magician's special knowledge: in one spell, the magician who wishes to invoke Apollo for prophetic purposes holds an ebony staff as well as a laurel branch, and in others the leaves of the laurel branch must have special letters or figures (*characterēs*) drawn upon them. The magician rubs a specially concocted ointment on his mouth to ensure that he will remember what the god tells him. The long invocatory passages that include allusions to Delphi and Claros and to Apollo's traditional, Homeric personality also include epithets that we never find associated with Apollo in earlier sources, such as “night-wanderer,” “god of many forms,” “you who are humanity's subduer,” and names that look (to us anyway) like nonsense words (*PGM* I.262–347, cf. VI.1–47). These are what ancient sources call the *onomata barbara* or “foreign names” of a god. They were never supposed to be translated into more familiar languages, lest they lose their particular power to please and attract the god to whom they belong.

Apollo's company in these texts is also interesting: one spell invokes Michael, Gabriel, Iao (that is, Yahweh) and Adonai to join Apollo as he prophesies (*PGM* I.262–347): this is a clear instance of the cultural mixing that I mentioned earlier and it underscores how permeable were the ethnic boundaries that some modern scholars still hold dear. But even more intriguing are two spells that seem to expect “Laurel” herself to help out:

Laurel, Apollo's holy plant of presage, whose leaves the scepter-bearing lord once tasted and sent forth songs himself . . . give heed to my song.  
(*PGM* II.81–3)

Hail, undying shoot, Delphic maiden, Laurel; you shake your bough and urge on Phoebus Apollo. In hymns they praise your tunefulness from holy Delphi. O Maiden who exult in tones divine . . . (*PGM* III.251–4)



These phrases have good mythological precedent: as I discussed in Chapter 2, the laurel became Apollo's sacred plant after a nymph whom he loved, called Laurel (or in Greek, Daphne), was turned into a tree. Apollo honored his lost love by naming the new tree after her and wearing her leaves as a crown, as did his Pythia at Delphi. But however popular the myth may have been in ancient literature and art, and however commonly the plant may have been used in public ceremonies connected with Apollo, it was only the magicians who thought of turning the tree back into a nymph, so to speak, and invoking her divinatory help as they would invoke the help of other gods. We have to admire the bold inventiveness of their innovation: by doing this, they brought themselves into much more intense contact with whatever divine force was imagined to lurk within the laurel than did the prophets who only carried it or wore it.

### *Seeing it for Yourself*

And close encounters were the name of the game, not only in Apollonian prophetic procedures but in many other divinatory spells. *Sustaseis*, or "face-to-face encounters," and *autopsiai*, or "direct visions" of the god, had always been highly prized – it was already the mark of a Homeric hero to interact directly with the gods – but the increased emphasis on personal relationships with the gods during the period we are studying made other people feel that they should, and could, also enjoy what had once been a heroic privilege (cf. Lane Fox 1986: Ch. 8). Many did so by being initiated into mystery cults, where they could form special relationships with the gods that would profit them both after death and here and now. The initiation ritual brought the individual into contact with the god in one way or another and in doing so "perfected" him or her (the words that we usually translate as "initiation" and "initiate" are actually formed on the Greek root *tele-*, which means "completion" or "perfection"). Once perfected, the individual could be confident of a continuing relationship with the god. As Isis says to Lucius, "you will live blessed in this world . . . and after you have died and descended below, you will see me again in the subterranean realm, shining forth in the darkness of Acheron and reigning by the depths of the Styx; you will dwell in the Elysian fields and worship me again as one who favored you" (Apuleius, *The Golden Ass* 11.6). Some institutional oracles offered "initiations," as well, either as a necessary preliminary to consultation or as an extra enhancement, as we saw in Chapter 3.

Many magicians also began from this model; quite a few spells that aim at face-to-face encounters start with the magician either initiating himself or, more rarely, being initiated by another magician. For instance,



*PGM* IV.26–51, which is entitled “*Teletē*,” tells the magician to sacrifice a rooster to the Sun upon the freshly-washed banks of the receding Nile – a naturally pure, sacred space. He then must drink some of the rooster’s blood (thus incorporating into himself part of an animal sacred to the Sun), bathe in the Nile and don new clothes. The final part of the spell tips us off as to its real goal: the magician concocts an ointment out of owl’s bile and uses an ibis feather to rub it on his eyes. Judging from other uses of eye ointments in the papyri, this means that he anticipates seeing the god of the Sun in person; it was for this reason that he needed to “perfect” himself by means of the other rituals. And judging from other spells in which magicians meet gods in person, the point of the encounter was to gain information. That is, the initiation comprised the preliminary part of a divinatory procedure. Mainstream mystery initiations sought contact with the gods to ensure prosperity and a happy afterlife; magical mystery initiations, as we see them in the papyri spells, sought contact in order to learn. The difference between them fades in contrast to the underlying assumption that they shared: personal relationships with the gods were the key to all sorts of benefits (Johnston 2002).

Some of the initiations that preceded divinatory contact between the magician and a god were very elaborate. *PGM* XIII.646–734 tells the magician to prepare for his initiation by sleeping on the ground for seven nights – again, a purifying ritual. On the eighth day, armed with a tablet on which to write down what the god will later tell him, as well as two roosters, a clean knife and a libation made from wine and the milk of a black cow, the magician goes out to pitch a special tent, under which the rest of the ceremony will take place. On the edge of the tent’s fabric he must write the names of 365 gods. He dresses carefully for his initiation: clean linen, an olive wreath and two amulets that hang around his neck. One amulet is made from cinnamon, “for the deity is pleased by it, and gave it power.” The other is a tiny statuette of Apollo, his tripod and a serpent, carved from the root of a laurel tree (again, we see an innovative way of incorporating Apollo’s favorite plant into the ritual). The statuette is inscribed all over with magical names.

Once properly dressed and inside of the tent, the magician writes his invocation of Apollo on both sides of a tablet made from natron. He licks half of the invocation off one side and then pours his libation over the other side, washing the ink of its letters into a bowl from which he will later drink. He then repeats the invocation aloud. The spell continues with careful instructions about what to expect and what to do:

When the god comes in do not stare at his face, but look at his feet while beseeching him, as written above, and giving thanks that he did not treat

you contemptuously, but thought you worthy of the things about to be said to you for the correction of your life. You then ask “Master, what is fated for me?” And he will tell you even about your star, and what kind of *daimon* you have, and your horoscope and where you may live and where you will die. And if you hear something bad, do not cry out or weep, but ask that he may wash it off or circumvent it, for this god can do everything. Therefore, when you begin questioning, thank him for having heard you and not overlooked you. Always sacrifice to this [god] in this way and offer your pious devotions, for thus he will hear you.

There is a code of conduct here as courteous as any found in Miss Manners: the magician treats the god properly and is treated properly in return. The exchange is an almost friendly one, once we allow for the difference in status between the two participants.

Some spells that are intended to accomplish divine encounters are more specific about what the magician should see when the god arrives. There are two reasons for this. The first is the expectation that a mere mortal cannot sustain the sight of a god in his or her real form: according to myth, after all, the Theban princess Semele had burst into flames when Zeus appeared to her undisguised. Thus, some spells ask that a god appear in a form that is “gracious and pleasant” for the human viewer – if not from the start then at least after he has spoken the right words in the right way: “And you will see the gods staring intently at you and rushing at you. So at once put your right finger on your mouth and say: ‘Silence! Silence! Silence!’ . . . Then you will see the gods looking graciously upon you and no longer rushing at you but rather going about their own order of affairs” (PGM IV.555–67). But the other reason that the magician should know what to expect is to protect himself against the tricks of lesser entities – angels, *daimones*, dead souls, etc. – pretending to be gods. Such creatures might pass on faulty information, either accidentally or on purpose. The risk is neatly demonstrated by a tale about the theurgist Iamblichus. An Egyptian magician invoked Apollo and the god duly appeared – or so it seemed. But Iamblichus, who could “see with the eyes of the mind instead of the deceitful eyes of the body,” revealed that the spirit was nothing more than the ghost of a dead gladiator (Eunapius, *Lives of the Philosophers* 473).

Iamblichus had quite an interest in these matters; a good portion of the second book of his treatise *Concerning the Mysteries* is spent on delineating the ways in which each rank of entities looks and sounds when visiting the theurgist. Being Platonists at heart, the theurgists couldn’t imagine that gods and angels really had anthropomorphic forms – such creatures must be fiery and filled with light, and like nothing seen in the

earthly world. In one of the *Chaldean Oracles*, spoken by Hecate to prepare the theurgist for higher forms of divine encounters and divination, the goddess says:

But when you see the sacred fire without form,  
Shining skittishly throughout the depths of the cosmos,  
Listen to its voice.

(*Chaldean Oracles* fr. 148)

But in another fragment of the *Chaldean Oracles*, Hecate suggests that some lesser entities might manifest themselves as fiery boys on horseback – perhaps, again, a way of being “gracious and pleasant” (fr. 146; cf. Johnston 1992). We are reminded of the reason that Alexandra, the priestess of Demeter Thesmophoros, consulted the Oracle at Didyma: apparently the gods had been appearing a great deal recently, perhaps, in the forms of maidens, women, men and children (above, pages 89–90).

Whatever the form, all of this fiery business constitutes *phōtagōgia*, a ritualized “leading in of light” from the divine realm, which will enable the theurgist to gain information as well as other benefits. Iamblichus sounds a note of caution, however: he tells us that the brilliance of the gods’ light can be tolerated only briefly by mortals – and that even when it does enter the eyes of a human, such light can actually be “seen” only by the soul. Although a brief encounter with divinity in this form could purify the soul of the theurgist and enhance his long-term health, he grew feeble and struggled to breathe while experiencing it. The theurgist may not have been worried about visits by gods who were frightening in appearance, as was the magician, but the theurgist did understand direct encounters to be a blessing that might carry a price (*Mysteries* 2.8; cf. Johnston 2004).

### *Fire and Water*

There were other methods available, too, that were easier to effect and less shocking to the system, including lychnomancy, or divining by the flame of a lamp (*lychnos*). One spell in the papyri actually refers to lychnomancy as a form of *phōtagōgia*, suggesting that the magicians thought the two methods amounted to much the same thing (*PGM* IV.930–1114; cf. Iamblichus, *Mysteries* 3.14). The version of lychnomancy that we find in the papyri, however, may actually be a new variation of an older method of divination found in temple cult. In Chapters 3 and 4, I described empyromancy, or divining by the flames of a sacrificial fire,

which was practiced from an early period at the temple of Zeus at Olympia and at the temple of Apollo in Thebes. Lychnomancy may have developed as a small-scale version of this that anyone could use at home. As such, it would have appealed to the magicians who, as I noted, often scaled down temple-based procedures for use in domestic settings.

As we see it in the magical papyri, however, lychnomancy was undoubtedly more satisfying than empyromancy. Typically, in empyromancy, someone had to *interpret* the behavior of the flames – whether they flared up or died down, for example. In lychnomancy, although it was the flame of a lamp that one stared at, what one eventually saw was the very gods themselves. *PDM* xiv.117–49 refers to the “great god who is seated in the [lamp’s] flame” and *PGM* V.370–446, a lengthy spell designed to invoke Hermes, includes the following invocation: “O Hermes, lord of the world . . . I ask you, O lord, to be gracious to me and without deceit appear and prophesy to me.” And then, the spell continues: “you say to your lamp the following words: ‘you who shake the world, come in and prophesy concerning the matter I enquire about.’” Another spell (*PGM* IV.930–1114) includes the following invocation:

I call upon you, the living god, fiery, invisible begetter of light . . . to enter into this fire, to fill it with a divine spirit and show me your might. Let there be opened for me the house of the all-powerful god ALBALAL who is in the light. Let there be light, breadth, depth, length, height, brightness, and let him who is inside shine through.

In these and other spells, the flame is presented as a sort of portal between the divine world and the human world, through which gods might pass in order to appear directly in front of the magician. A closely related type of divination, called lecanomancy, required a person to gaze at a bowl (*lekanē*) of water or other liquid into which a lamp’s flame was reflected – similarly, the gazer would eventually see not the shimmering water, but the gods themselves. In both techniques, we again see the magician’s determination to bring himself closer to the gods than he could get in mainstream civic cults. (For each type of divination, moreover, we have spells that declare the lychnomantic or lecanomantic experience to be a personal encounter [*sustasis*] or direct vision [*autopsia*], e.g., *PGM* IV.930–1114, V.54–69.)

But often, instead of staring at the flame or water himself, the practitioner would employ a young assistant to do so – some spells even allow for both variations, as in the following example from *PDM* xiv.528–53. The practitioner begins by making a series of declarations to various gods, most importantly Anubis, to whom he finally says (lines 539–44),

Hail Anubis, Pharaoh of the Underworld! Let the darkness depart! Bring the light to me in my bowl-enquiry . . . let the one whose face is bent down over the bowl flourish until the gods come in and tell me an answer concerning my question, about which I am enquiring here today, truly, without falsehood, immediately! . . . Go forth at once, Anubis! Bring to me the gods of this city and the god who gives an answer today.

Then, the papyrus says (lines 545–53): “When you open your eyes or when the youth [opens his eyes] and you see the light, you should recite to the light, ‘Hail, O Light! Come forth, come forth, O Light.’” Eventually, after enough recitations of this phrase, the spell says that Anubis enters – that is, Anubis appears in the water of the bowl, into which the light of the lamp is being directed. Then, Anubis departs and fetches all the other gods, bringing them back into the light-filled bowl as well – they all stand around in front of the person who gazes into the bowl. At this point, the magician tells Anubis to go forth and fetch a table, wine, food and all the other accoutrements of a feast that the gods can enjoy. After the gods have eaten, the practitioner asks which one of them is willing to speak to him, and that god politely raises his or her hand. After he is finished questioning the god who volunteered, the magician sends all of them out of the bowl again.

Why might the magician employ a second person to do the gazing for him – and usually a child? If lychnomancy and lecanomancy were understood as varieties of *phōtagōgia*, and if the encounters with the gods in the flames and the water were understood as varieties of *sustasis* and *autopsia*, then why would the magician choose to displace the splendor of such an experience onto another person – why would he sit back and listen to what a child told him when he could be seeing it for himself? The ancient rationale for this was that, first, children were likely to be freer than adults from bodily pollutions that might repel the gods – although even so, the magician had to be careful: “the child you use should be uncorrupted and pure!” orders one spell, and others echo that edict (*PGM* VII.540–785). Second, children were also thought to be “simpler” in mind and therefore less likely to imagine that they saw something that wasn’t really there (Iamblichus, *Mysteries* 3.24 and Olympiodorus, *Commentary on Plato’s Alcibiades*, p. 8 Cr.). A similar approach was taken to choosing the Pythia, as we saw in Chapter 2: ideally, she should be inexperienced and unlearned; if possible the daughter of a poor farmer from the country. Julian the Chaldean apparently used his own son, the future Julian the Theurgist, for mediumistic purposes (Psellus, *Concerning the Golden Chain* 216.24).

Perhaps the first assumption about children was correct, but modern studies prove that the second certainly was not: children want to be good

“conversational partners” for adults who ask them questions, and therefore unconsciously tailor their reactions to suit whatever the occasion demands. If a magician repeatedly asks the child whether he sees Anubis, then, it is scarcely surprisingly that the child will eventually do so. Whether he realized it or not, when a magician used a child as a medium, he set the bar of empirical reality a bit lower than it would have been had he done the gazing himself. And by doing that, he improved his chances of success (Johnston 2001). If we knew more about the belly-talkers (*engastrimuthoi*) whom I discussed at the end of Chapter 4, we might discover that they, too, were often young people or people chosen from simple backgrounds.

### *Sending Dreams, Receiving Dreams*

In the last chapter, I noted that throughout antiquity, dreams were a very popular method of divining because they were free to all – although some people resorted upon occasion to the learned advice of a professional (an *oneiropolitēs* or *oneiropolos*) when it came to interpreting what a dream had meant. This holds true for the magical papyri, as well, where dreams are presented as a readily available means of obtaining information from the divine realm and the magician is presented as an expert at interpreting and manipulating them. We also find spells guaranteeing that the magician will receive good prophetic dreams himself, but even more interestingly, we find spells teaching the magician how to send dreams to other people, which can then be used to put ideas into the sleepers’ minds that they will accept as divinely prophetic.

I will start with the last type: dream-sending spells. The basic idea that a dream could be dispatched to a sleeper was an old one. Already in the *Odyssey*, Athena sends a dream to Penelope that takes on the shape of her sister Iphthime and comforts her (4.795–841). It is only in the magical papyri, however, that we see humans, rather than gods, performing such feats, and it is also in the papyri that we first encounter the technical term for such an art, “*oneiropompeia*” (literally “dream sending”). A good example comes from PGM III.1–164: “Take a cat, and make it into an Osiris [that is, kill it] by submerging its body in water. While you are drowning it, speak the following formula to its back” (Fig. 13). We then get a lengthy pronouncement that invokes Bastet, the Egyptian cat-faced goddess, to help the magician accomplish the rest of the spell. After that, the magician is told to prepare the dead cat’s body by inserting amulets into its various orifices, mummifying it and finally entombing it. Next, he is told to invoke the ghost of the cat, saying: “I conjure you, at this time and at this

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*Figure 13* Drawing from the spell recorded at *PGM* III.1–164, showing an animal-headed creature that is probably meant to represent the ghost of the cat that magician must kill as part of the spell. *Source:* Hans Dieter Betz, ed., *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation* (1986). Published by University of Chicago Press

place . . . perform the deed I request” (lines 39–41). He also must call on Hecate, the mistress of ghosts, Hermes, who is responsible for leading ghosts out of the Underworld, and a strange hybrid divinity named Hermecate, asking them to ensure that the ghost of the cat cooperates (lines 47–51). After reciting further formulas, the magician must grasp the cat’s whiskers (apparently he was supposed to save them out from the mummification process) and hold them in front of him as a form of protection against anything nasty that might be lurking around (lines 95–7 and 125–7). After yet further recitations, the ghost of the cat finally manifests itself. The magician now can order the ghost to do almost anything, including, as the spell states, send dreams into other people’s sleep – *oneiropompeia* (line 163).

The spell doesn’t tell us how the ghost of the cat will do that, but the basic principle is clear: to send dreams, one needs to obtain control of a ghost. This is made explicit in other oneiropompic spells, which rely on spirits of the dead or sometimes a god connected with the world of the dead, such as Anubis, to do their work (e.g., *PGM* VII.862–913; *PDM* xvi.1070–7). The principle aligns well with many other ancient magical



practices, which also use ghosts or Underworld gods as their factotums. Notably, however, practices that rely on ghosts tend to be invasive – that is, they compel people to do things that they otherwise would not do. For example, a magician can use restless ghosts to force an uncooperative lover to cooperate. This underscores an interesting point: when orchestrated by humans rather than gods, *oneiropompeia* is an aggressive act, performed in the interest of the magician or his client, with little concern for the dreamer. Ghosts also tend to be deceptive – magicians can command them to assume whatever shape is necessary to fool the dreamer into believing the messages that they carry. As we see it in the magical papyri, then, there is nothing in *oneiropompeia* that approaches what Athena did when she dispatched a dream to comfort Penelope.

There are a few oneiropompic spells that don't use ghosts or Underworld gods to do their work, although in the end the intention of the act is much the same. Two are particularly interesting, as they teach the magician how to make Eros appear in a person's dream and liken himself to whatever form the magician specifies (PGM IV.1716–1870 and PGM XII.14–95). In both cases, however, Eros is presented as a rather lowly, subordinate god, who is compelled to serve as the assistant of the magician; this aligns with the general perception, during the time, of Eros as a divinity who could be easily controlled once one knew the right techniques. Eros is also an appropriate divinity for working these spells because their purpose is to inflict love or sexual desire upon unwilling women – in other words, the magicians are once again using dreams to invade sleepers' minds and compel them to act against their own best interests. Scholars have often characterized dreams in the ancient world as comprising a particularly private means of communicating with the divine – and this is correct, when we are thinking of incubation rites, for example, in which a god healed a patient while he or she dreamt (Chapter 3), or when we are thinking of methods of foretelling the future by interpreting one's own dreams (Chapter 4). But precisely *because* the dream world was normally understood to be a private world, the possibility that magicians were able to invade it would have been frightening indeed. After all, how could the average person really tell the difference between a reliable dream – that is, one sent by the gods for the dreamer's benefit – and an unreliable dream, sent to trick the dreamer? It was bad enough that the gods occasionally deceived mortals through dreams (the prime example being Zeus' deception of Agamemnon in the second book of the *Iliad*), but once unscrupulous magicians were added to the mix, the world of the sleeper must have seemed precarious indeed.

The late antique *Alexander Romance* demonstrates just how insidious false dreams sent by a magician could be. According to the author of the



*Romance*, the child who would become Alexander the Great was sired upon Olympias not by her husband King Philip, but by Nectanebo, a visitor from Egypt, that land of magic *par excellence*. In order to seduce Olympias, Nectanebo first advised her that, if she wanted to conceive the son that Philip longed for, she must have sex with the god Ammon. Nectanebo promised Olympias that Ammon would visit her while she slept. Nectanebo then made a wax figurine of Olympias, sprinkled lamps with an infusion of various herbs (perhaps an allusion to lychnomancy?), and commanded demons to cause her to dream of making love with Ammon, night after night. Once Olympias had come to enjoy these dreams, Nectanebo himself dressed up as Ammon and crept into her bed. Olympias, who had been deceived first by the false dreams disguised as Ammon and then again by Nectanebo, a dream that was not actually even a dream, conceived a child that she believed to be the son of a god. Philip, who returned from a lengthy trip to find his wife pregnant, became the victim of Nectanebo's oneiro-pompic tricks as well – Nectanebo killed a hawk and commanded its spirit to tell Philip, in a dream, that the baby his wife was carrying was divine. Philip believed the false dream and acquiesced with the pregnancy (*Alexander Romance* 1.4–12). A similar story is found in the gospel writer Matthew, although it plays out quite differently, of course: when Joseph tries to put aside his pregnant fiancée, Mary, an angel appears to him in a dream and assures him that her child, too, is divine (Matthew 1.18–22).

Not surprisingly, if magicians used *oneiropompeia* to manipulate other people's dreams, they also developed skills to guarantee the integrity of their own. For example, in one spell the magician ritually invokes Apollo to "come hither quickly, hasten to sing divine precepts to me and to proclaim pure words and true sayings at night as you recount the truth through dream oracles." In another, the magician writes his request for a particular type of dream on a piece of tinfoil, places it under his pillow and before going to sleep calls on the gods to reveal to him information concerning the specified matter. In a third, the magician engraves an agate with a picture of the god Sarapis and Sarapis' name and sets the stone into a ring. Before he goes to bed, he must put the ring on the index finger of his left hand and fall asleep holding the ring to his ear – apparently expecting Sarapis to speak to him in his sleep (*PGM* VI.1–47, VII.740–55, V.447–58).

In these dreams, it is always a god whom the magician expects to see, rather than one of the assistants or spirits of the dead who work the oneiro-pompic spells. Moreover, the magician often asks the god to appear in "one of his own forms" (e.g., *PGM* V.370–446 and VII.664–85). Indeed, in a Demotic spell, the god is asked to appear in the same form as he did when he appeared to Moses – was the magician expecting to

see the god's posterior, or the god in the form of a burning bush (*PDM* xiv.117–49 esp. 130)? Alternatively, the magician might ask the god to appear in some other shape, but always a pleasant one. In one case, for instance, a god is asked to take on the form of a priest, and in another, he is to appear in the form of a priest if what the practitioner is enquiring about will turn out well and in the form of a soldier if it will not (*PDM* xiv.93–114, xiv.232–8). In the latter spell, and in another one where the god is asked to take on any of four specified forms, depending on what he intends to convey to the dreamer, empirical reality once again may be creeping in: allowing the god some leeway in his appearance allowed the magician's subconscious mind, as we would now call it, some leeway as well.

The magician's determination to see the gods in either their true forms or at least forms that he could predict and interact with comfortably reminds us again both of some of the spells we looked at in the section on direct visions, and also of Iamblichus' insistence that a theurgist must learn to recognize each rank of divine entity and how best to interact with it. Of course, the magicians also preferred to get visits from gods because gods possessed greater and more accurate information than did ghosts and similar creatures; if one were trying to divine by dreams, then gods were the safest bet. Another point is that receiving a divine dream visit put the magician into a rather exclusive group. Like Homer's Penelope or Virgil's Aeneas (who receives dream visits from both Mercury and the god of the River Tiber: *Aeneid* 4.554–72 and 8.26–67), the person who saw the gods in his sleep – and indeed gods who took the trouble to make themselves attractive to human eyes – was clearly worthy of divine attention.

Before we leave the topic of magically induced divinatory dreams, we need to return to lychnomancy. *PDM* xiv.117–49 instructs the magician:

You should go into a dark, clean room whose face opens to the south, you should purify it with natron water, you should bring in a new white lamp to which no red lead or gum water has been applied; you should put a clean wick in it; you should fill it with real oil after first writing certain names and figures on the wick with ink made of myrrh; you should put it on a new, pure brick in front of yourself and you should recite the following spells to the lamp seven times. If you put frankincense up in front of the lamp and you look at the lamp, you will see the god near the lamp. Then, go to sleep on a reed mat and he will tell you the answer you seek in a dream.

In this case and in several others from the magical papyri, a personal visit by the god, effected through the portal of the lamp's flame, has been displaced into the world of sleep. We might, again, invoke "empirical reality" to explain this combination of what seem to us like two separate

divinatory methods: we might reason that people had more success at seeing gods in their dreams than directly in the flame of a lamp, much less standing before you in real life.

But this is not all there was to it. The broader cultural and intellectual *milieux* of the times strongly identified divinity with light and fire. We have already seen this in theurgy's practice of *phōtagōgia* and in lychnomancy and lecanomancy themselves, but it is evident as well in various mystery cults of the time and in the widespread heliolatry of the Roman empire. Whatever else the magician thought he was doing, by sanctifying a specially created lamp and then using it as a means to bring a god into his dreams – by creating his own, tiny domestic version of divine light – the dreaming magician was probably adapting to his own special uses contemporary ideas about divinity. Such adaptability is one of the hallmarks of the ancient magician, as I have already stressed: he adjusted to his own environment and his own goals the patterns and practices of other, perhaps more public, religious systems. Probably, it had always been the hallmark of the independent diviner, too, outside as well as inside the circle of the magical papyri: the *engastrimuthoi*, for example, seem to have adopted and adapted certain aspects of divination as practiced at Delphi. Had we richer sources for divination in earlier periods of Greek history (or for magic in those periods) it is likely that the picture I am presenting in this chapter would be found there as well.

### *Divinatory Statues*

Earlier, I noted that words formed on the *tele-* root imply “perfection” or “completion.” And so it is with the next form of divination I will look at: *telestikē*, or the “telestic art.” Here, the word refers to the perfection or completion of a statue, into which a god may then be called through special rituals. Once the god has entered the statue, he or she can bestow all sorts of benefits on the mortals who are present, including special information – that is, the statue can be used for divinatory purposes. Although there are some traces of telestic rituals in the magical papyri, it is most prominent in theurgic sources, and it was from those sources that later writers, including the Christian fathers who condemned *telestikē* and the Renaissance intellectuals who subsequently re-embraced it, drew their information.

Proclus, a Neoplatonist of the fifth century CE from whom we get much of our information about theurgy, tells us that: “the telestic art, by means of *symbola* and ineffable *synthēmata*, represents and makes statues suitable to become receptacles for the illuminations of the gods”

(*Commentary on Plato's Cratylus* 19.12). "Illumination" here refers to the entry of a god into a statue; the imagery draws, as does so much else that I am discussing in this chapter, on the common idea that the gods were made of light or fire. Two other words also need clarification. In theurgic and magical contexts, "*symbola*" refers to objects, words and sounds in the human world that have a special connection to a particular god. "*Synthēmata*" can also refer to such objects, but it more often describes words or phrases, (oral or written) that have the effect of a *symbolon*. *Synthēmata*, then, are a sub-group of *symbola*.

But what are these *symbola* and *synthēmata* out of which telestic statues should be created? Our modern word "symbol" usually implies that there is a resemblance between the symbol and whatever it represents, but this was not always the case in theurgy or magic. Although we can easily see similarities between the Sun and gold, which was one of the Sun-god's *symbola* in the theurgic system, for example, it's harder for us to guess why the lion was also a *symbolon* of the Sun. Nor is this only because we are cut off from the discourse of the time: Proclus already cautioned his own readers that the relationship between a *symbolon* and the god with which it was associated might seem obscure or paradoxical: "*symbola* are not imitations of that which they symbolize." Rather, the relationship between the Sun-god and lions, for instance, is to be found in the theurgic belief that "chains" of gods, planets, creatures and objects hang down from the highest level of the cosmos, where the divine Father resides, and vertically link each separate cosmic realm to the others – a development of the Stoic idea of *sympatheia* that underlay so many intellectualizing discussions of divination more generally. The Sun happens to be situated on the same chain as are gold, roosters, lions, the heliotrope, a mineral called "sun-stone," and various other things. Therefore the Sun could dwell within a statue made out of some of these ingredients without either compromising his own divinity or disrupting the lower physical world into which he has entered by means of that statue (Proclus, *On the Hieratic Art*; for further discussion see Johnston 2008 and Struck 2004: chs 6 and 7).

We might wonder why the theurgist used *symbola* to make *statues* of the gods, rather than simply mixing them together to create some other, simpler type of object in which the god could temporarily dwell. If what mattered was using the correct materials, after all, why take the additional trouble of representing the god anthropomorphically? The theurgists insisted that it was the gods who had told them to do so – in fact, the gods had even taught the theurgists exactly how their statues should look. According to the third-century philosopher Porphyry, the gods had told the theurgists

what sort of shape should be given to their statues, and in what forms they show themselves, and in what sorts of places they dwell . . . They even suggested how their statues ought to be made, and out of what materials . . . Moreover they themselves indicated how they appear as far as their forms are concerned, and based on this their images were set up as they are. (*Concerning Statues* fr. 316 Smith)

Porphyry then goes on to provide several oracles in which the gods do exactly what he describes, including a passage that most scholars understand to be a fragment of the *Chaldean Oracles*, in which Hecate tells the theurgist to make her statue out of a mixture of wild rue, resin, myrrh, frankincense and the ground-up remains of a kind of small lizard that dwells near houses (fr. 224).

But we still don't know *why* the gods tell humans to make anthropomorphic statues. Another passage from Porphyry takes us a bit closer to an answer: "Mortals indicated god and god's powers to the senses by cognate images, and thus formed invisible things into visible shapes, as I will show *to those who have learned to read from the statues as from books the things that are written there concerning the gods*" (*Concerning Statues* fr. 351 Smith). By studying the features of a statue from a properly allegorical viewpoint, in other words, a person could learn more about the nature of the particular god whom he was worshipping – the gods intended statues to be educational. Of course, I have in a sense presented all of this backwards. Theurgists and other intellectuals of later antiquity justified using telestic statues as receptacles for the gods by arguing that mortals could enhance their understanding of divinity by interpreting them, but behind this justification undoubtedly lay another compelling, although unacknowledged, reason that the theurgists liked statues. Statues were a long-established part of traditional cult, which the theurgists frequently took pains to adopt and defend in the face of Christianity and other movements of the time that threatened Greek religion.

I should add that, although it seems to have been the theurgists who developed rituals for creating special telestic statues and then calling the gods into them, we do encounter the idea of divining from a statue in other sources, too. Gods might spontaneously enter their statues and cause them to move, weep, or do various other things, which their worshippers were then expected to interpret. Lucian tells us about a statue of Apollo in Hieropolis/Bambyce (a popular ancient resort city near the Euphrates) that was especially renowned for this sort of behavior. It moved around on its throne whenever it wanted the temple priests to pick it up; if they delayed too long, it would move more vigorously and begin to sweat. Once they had picked it up, the statue indicated to them the direction in which

it wanted to be carried. After the statue had reached a place where it was happy, the high priest would ask it questions. If the statue moved backwards, the answer was no; if it moved forward, the answer was yes. We hear about similar statues in Egypt at about the same time (Cicero, *Divination* 1.74, 1.98–9, 2.58; Lucian, *On the Syrian Goddess* 36; cf. Diodorus Siculus 17.50–1, Strabo 17.1.43, and Frankfurter 1998: 146–8, 151–7).

Other temple statues seemed to speak: the third-century Christian author Hippolytus accused unscrupulous priests of inventing a clever way to make this happen. Taking the windpipe of a crane or other long-necked bird, they could feed it through a hole bored from the mouth of a statue to the back of its head and then on through the wall in back. From the room next door, the priest could make the statue “speak” by talking into the windpipe (Hippolytus, *The Refutation of All Heresies* 4.41; Alexander of Abonuteichos was said to have used basically the same technique to make his trumped-up snake-god speak, as we saw in Chapter 3). The theurgists certainly perfected the niceties of how a divinely possessed statue ought to be created and carefully justified its existence within the material world, but they probably were inspired by what was already a popular expectation of the time.

### *Mills and Spheres, Skulls and Corpses*

We are far from having exhausted the methods of divination that show up in our magical sources. We meet with variations of the dice and lot oracles that I discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 – including a dice oracle that employed 216 verses from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as its answers, and a technique that combined dice divination with lecanomancy in order to discover whether a man would live or perish (the enquirer threw a die into the bowl he usually used for gazing and then plugged the resulting number into a rather complex mathematical formula). We glimpse an interest in astrology behind some fragmentary references to good times of day and days of the week on which to perform divinatory rituals, as well references to the zodiac (*PGM* VII.1–148, L.1–18, LXII.47–51; III.275–81, VII.155–67, XIII.734–1077, LXII.52–75).

But we also meet with some forms of divination that are completely unparalleled in our earlier sources. One of them, entitled “The Oracle of Cronus in great demand, called ‘Little Mill,’” instructs the magician to grind salt in a hand-mill at night, in a place where the grass grows. He speaks a formula until Cronus appears and tells him what he wants to know. The magician is warned that while he grinds, he may hear the heavy steps and

the clanging noise of someone who is bound in chains; moreover, the god may manifest himself with a sickle in his hand. The magician must not be frightened by all of this – he must remember that he is protected by a phylactery that he wears, carved from the bone of a young pig or a castrated boar and engraved with a picture of Zeus holding a sickle (*PGM* IV.3086–124). The imagery of the spell draws on well-known myths (Cronus castrated his father Uranus with a sickle but was subsequently supplanted by his son Zeus; he was often envisioned in chains). So much is clear. But Cronus is not usually a divinatory god, and scarcely appears elsewhere in magical texts of any kind. And what about that mill, of which there is no other instance in ancient divination as far as I know? The spell is intriguing; if we can say nothing else, we can point to it as yet another demonstration of the magicians' intense desire to collect and develop new means of gaining information from the gods.

Another, very short spell, called "Democritus' 'sphere': prognostic of life and death," instructs the magician to find out on what day an ill person took to his bed, add the numerical value of the person's name to the numerical value of that day, and then divide by 30. Finally, taking that quotient, he should consult Democritus' "sphere" (apparently a chart printed on a globe). If the quotient number is on the top half of the sphere, the person will live, but if it is on the bottom half, he will die (*PGM* XII.351–64). This is similar to some methods of divining by dice; a number is produced in any of various ways and an answer that corresponds to that number is discovered in a list or table. The surprising element, as in the "Little Mill," once again comes from the figure on whom the technique relies: Democritus, apparently meaning the fifth-century BCE Greek philosopher and mathematician.

This is not Democritus' only appearance in a magical context (remember, for example, that in the passage I cited at the beginning of this chapter, Isidore of Seville called him one of magic's founding fathers), but it is especially interesting to see him connected with this technical form of divination. He eschewed all means of divination other than dreams; even then, his explanation for how dreams might tell the future was tied firmly into his scientific theories of vision (see above pages 15–16). His presence in the papyri not only indicates how legendary figures of history could be swept up into associations that they would have blenched to think about, but also underscores again how permeable are any boundaries we might try to draw between magic and many other specialized activities in antiquity. Mathematics, a simple form of which is foregrounded in this spell, was one of Democritus' specialties; throughout antiquity, it seems particularly to have impressed people with its apparently arcane, "magical" power. Pythagoras, who was also a pioneer in that field, was reputed to have



visited the Persian *magi* and the Chaldean wonder-men; as time went on, his name, too, was attached to all sorts of divinatory and magical knowledge, including a dream-oracle spell that was credited to him and Democritus together (*PGM* VII.795–845). Philosophy, which was always associated with mathematics in antiquity, also drew closer together with magic and divination during the period we are discussing. The theurgists are a prime example of this: they built their ontology and metaphysics on Platonic cosmological principles, but their practical soteriology was rooted in texts called the *Chaldean Oracles*, in the telestically prophetic statues I examined earlier and in mediumistic prophecy. Apollonius of Tyana, portrayed as an all-purpose wonder-worker and prophet, was also an ardent follower of philosophy, particularly that of Pythagoras (on Apollonius and other philosophers as magicians and wonder-workers, see Philostratus the Athenian, *Life of Apollonius*, e.g., Book 1.1–2; cf. Athanassiadi 1992).

My final topic also takes us back to the passage from Isidore that opened the chapter: necromancy. In Chapter 3, I noted that although the Greeks and Romans found necromancy “good to think with,” there is little indication that they actually practiced it. In the magical papyri of later antiquity, we finally encounter what bits of evidence there are: eight out of the approximately 600 spells in the magical papyri involve consulting the dead in order to learn things. In a Demotic spell (*PDM* lxi.79–94), the magician buries the head of a man who has drowned. He plants flax over the head and allows it to grow. He harvests the flax, digs up the head and washes it in milk. When the magician wants to discover the identity of a thief, he recites a spell to the head and then starts naming possible suspects as he ties knots in pieces of the harvested flax. The head will speak up when it hears the culprit’s name. The presumption seems to be that the ghost of the drowned man is providing the information; the preceding ritual (burial, planting, etc.), as well as the subsequent knotting of the flax that was brought into close contact with the head as it grew, somehow have placed the ghost under the magician’s control. This technique fits in with other, long-established magical practices: if you wanted a ghost to help you control a wayward lover, for example, it was useful to have some *ousia* (“essence”) from the relevant corpse – some hair, some fingernails or even a bit of the cloth in which it was buried. An entire head is somewhat extravagant by comparison, and certainly more dramatic, but broadly speaking, what we see here is an old technique being put to a different use: a ghost is expected to cough up information instead of binding a lover or rival. Similarly, in *PGM* I.262–347, Apollo is asked to send up a *daimon* from Hades (that is, a ghost), a piece of whose body the magician is holding. The *daimon* will tell the magician about prophecy,



divination in verses, the sending of dreams, obtaining dreams, revelations in dreams, interpretation of dreams, how to cause diseases and “everything that is a part of magical knowledge.”

The six other necromantic spells in our corpus all come from the same papyrus, the so-called “Great Paris Magical Papyrus” that was found in Egypt but that now resides in the Bibliothèque Nationale (*PGM* IV). This papyrus stands apart from the others in several ways: it is much longer than any other magical papyrus (3,274 lines as opposed to the next longest, *PDM* xiv, at 1,227 lines), it includes a greater variety of spells and it demonstrates acquaintance with a wider range of sources, concepts and techniques. It is this papyrus that includes the so-called Mithras Liturgy (a lengthy spell to make one’s soul ascend to the heavens, similar to theurgic techniques); “slander” spells, in which the magician compels divinities to harm people by claiming that those people said nasty things about them; the “Little Mill” spell that we have just discussed; several spells that invoke the Bear of the Big Bear constellation as if he were any other god; a spell for picking a plant in the proper way; and many more.

In other words, the magician who gathered these spells and copied them into his private recipe book seems to have been exposed to an even richer variety of techniques than most others. Five of the six necromantic spells that he recorded are clumped together, as if thinking of the first one led him to remember the others; four of those are attributed to the legendary King Pitys (*PGM* IV.1928–2240). Two are variations of divining by manipulating the skull of a dead person; this gives the magician power over the ghost, who will do whatever he wants it to do, including telling him what he wants to know. (The second of these, entitled “A restraining spell for skulls that are not satisfactory, and also to prevent them from speaking or doing anything whatever of this sort,” might better be called an anti-necromancy spell, for it seems to address situations in which a particular skull that was previously useful has gotten out of control and begun to babble.) A third spell attributed to Pitys involves spreading an ass’s hide beneath an entire corpse wherever it happens to lie (the ass was sacred to the Egyptian god Typhon, who is associated with the negative aspects of the Underworld). After the magician returns home that night, he will see the ghost (perhaps in a dream?) and be able to order it about. The fourth spell, entitled “Pitys the Thessalian’s spell for questioning corpses,” is very short, instructing the magician to inscribe certain words on a leaf of flax using a specially made ink. He then places the leaf in the mouth of a corpse. We are not told exactly what the results will be – is the corpse expected to speak with his mouth full of leaf?

The final and lengthiest spell in this series of five, “Divine assistance from three Homeric verses,” is multi-purpose. Three verses from the *Iliad*,

inscribed on an iron lamella, can accomplish a number of things: protect a runaway slave, cause a competitor's chariot to wreck in an upcoming race, make the bearer popular, fetch a lover – or get answers from the dead in three different ways. When attached to someone who is on the point of death, the lamella compels him to answer any question the magician may ask. When the lamella is attached to the corpse of an executed criminal, and the same verses are spoken into the corpse's ear, the ghost will tell the magician whatever he wants to know. When accompanied by a laurel leaf on which magical words have been written with ink made from myrrh and the blood of someone who has died violently, the lamella compels someone – apparently the ghost – to “reveal all things.” Other parts of this spell use the lamella to force one of the untimely or violently dead to wreck a chariot or restrain someone. Again, as with the Demotic necromantic spell, the old idea of using the restless dead to perform services has been extended into providing information, a perennial concern throughout all of the magical papyri.

Finally, the sixth spell in the Great Paris Magical Papyrus that includes a necromantic element stands separately from these others (*PGM* IV.154–285). It is actually part of an elaborate type of lecanomancy, presented in the form of a letter written by the Egyptian god Nephotes (Nefer-hotep) to Psammetichus, a legendary Egyptian king. Unlike the others, it does not involve direct contact with a corpse. The letter instructs Psammetichus (and therefore also any magician lucky enough to read a copy of the letter) to undergo a lengthy process of symbolic death and rebirth that will bring him into *sustasis* with Helios. Confirmation that the *sustasis* has occurred takes the form of a sea-falcon flying down to strike the magician with its wings. After this, whenever he wishes, the magician can put different kinds of water in his bowl in order to invoke different kinds of entities: rain-water for heavenly gods, sea-water for gods of the earth, river-water for Osiris and Sarapis and spring-water for the dead.

The big question, concerning all eight of our necromantic spells, is what they represent. Are they just the tip of a much-larger iceberg of now-lost necromantic techniques, of which the composer of *PGM* IV was particularly fond? Probably not; one of the overriding concerns of the papyri is divination (I would roughly estimate that somewhere between one third and one half of the spells are wholly or in part divinatory), and yet only these eight are necromantic. It is hard to imagine that significantly more examples have been accidentally lost to the sands of time. Was knowledge of such techniques repressed, for fear of discovery by the authorities? This seems unlikely, too; the papyri include spells for doing all sorts of other reprehensible and probably illegal things, after all: manipulating pieces of corpses in order to force their ghosts to harm other

people or bewitch unwilling lovers, for example. Whoever composed these papyri did not seem particularly worried about them being confiscated.

In several of our eight cases, moreover, the use of the dead seems almost like an afterthought, or sits rather awkwardly within a spell that otherwise looks like something else. In the spell we have just examined (*PGM* IV.154–285), for instance, necromancy appears as a sub-type of a much larger and very familiar category of divination, lecanomancy. The nature of its presence in the spell that uses three Homeric verses is similar. Another of the spells, *PGM* I.262–347, mostly comprises a lengthy prayer to Apollo in his familiar prophetic role; the request that he send up a *daimon* from Hades bursts into what otherwise is a traditional Apollonian invocation – and indeed, that is exactly what the title of the spell calls it. (Note, too, the use of a laurel leaf in the spell involving Homeric verse, which also seems to pull necromancy into an Apollonian sphere, although Apollo himself is not mentioned.) Christopher Faraone (2004) has perceived in *PGM* I.262–347 a collapsing together of two realms that were typically treated separately in Greek religious practice – the celestial and the chthonic (or what I would prefer to call the realm of the dead). Such a “collapse” in itself is not too surprising, given the enterprising, innovative nature of the freelance magicians, which I have commented on several times already in this chapter. If the dead can be made to wreck chariots and drag lovers to your door, why not also compel them to provide information? And if you want them to divine, why not adapt a proven divinatory technique to include them? If one of the best of those techniques involves Apollo, a celestial god, it is only the modern scholar who hesitates to bring the dead into the mix, not the magician.

Three of the remaining five spells are self-proclaimed examples of skull divination, and a fourth (*PDM* lxi.79–94, in which the head of a corpse is buried, retrieved and interrogated) is surely a form of skull divination as well. Cumulatively, they point to the deliberate development of a special technique that focused on the dead from its very inception, rather than the intrusion of the dead as a new element within an older pattern. The remaining instance, in which an ass’s hide is spread beneath a corpse, looks like this, too.

So this, after all the winnowing, is what our harvest has brought us: three spells that have been adapted to include necromantic elements and five spells that are more straightforwardly necromantic – although none of them promises anything as spectacular as the contemporary literary portraits of necromancy do – we hear nothing about reanimated corpses springing up out of their torpor, as in Lucan or Apuleius. (A chattering skull would have been exciting, but we read about that only in the spell that tells us how to get rid of the problem if it ever occurs. One wonders how many

magicians sighed and wished they could be so lucky as to need that advice.) Despite its potential, then, consultation of the dead never seems to have caught on in a big way (*contra* Ogden 2001).

Fritz Graf has tried to explain this paucity of necromantic techniques by suggesting that an element of empirical reality once again intrudes; he asks whether a magician could ever have convinced himself that he had really called up the dead (Graf 1997: 198–200). To me, this seems like special pleading: invocation of the dead is no more incredible than many of the other things that the papyri promise to help the magician accomplish. I would suggest, instead, that the answer lies in the perceived nature of the dead themselves. As useful as ghosts may have been for some purposes, they simply never developed a reputation as good informants. Already in the *Odyssey*, this is the case, as I noted in Chapter 3: when Odysseus interviews the dead, only the ghost of Tiresias, who was a *mantis* while alive, tells him anything new. The other ghosts, in contrast, ask Odysseus for information. Have you been home to Ithaca yet? asks his mother. How is my son? asks Achilles. Nor does the clueless nature of the dead change much as antiquity moves onward: a corpse that is revived in Apuleius' novel, *The Golden Ass*, can tell its listeners what happened the day before while its body was lying on the bier awaiting burial, but nothing else. Lucan's super-witch Erictho gets slightly better results insofar as her resurrected corpse converses at some length, but in the end even this ghost cannot tell Erictho's client what he really wants to know (Apuleius, *The Golden Ass* 2.29–30; Lucan 6.569–830). With the exception of our eight necromantic spells, this pattern holds true in the papyri, too: as I noted earlier in this chapter, ghosts were often called upon to invade other people's dreams and plant deceptive ideas in their minds, but if the magicians themselves wanted to receive *reliably* prophetic dreams, they called upon the gods. "The dead know nothing," said the author of Ecclesiastes, and, with very few exceptions, the sentiment was a widespread one in the ancient Mediterranean (Ecclesiastes 9: 5–6; cf. Schmidt 1994: esp. 121–43).

### *Magic and Divination*

In closing I want to return to the question I posed at the beginning of this chapter: why were divination and magic so often thought of together in antiquity? For the later periods, one reason we can invoke concerns something that I mentioned earlier: the Christian condemnation of anything having to do with the pagan gods – or in their view, rather, with the demons who pretended to be gods. Both divination and magic were

understood by the Christians to work by means of these demons and so the two were thrown into the same cauldron of illegal and immoral practices. This perception was shored up by the early Christian reading of the Book of Enoch, an apocryphal book of the Bible. According to Enoch, the fallen angels, in order to seduce the human women with whom they had fallen in love, gave them all sorts of corrupting knowledge: magic, divination, herbal medicine and, not least of all, cosmetics. The connection between magic and divination was further strengthened in the early Christian mind by the idea that in both cases, the demons were *deceiving* mortals, far more than in other religious practices of the pagans. To burn part of a sacrifice to a god might be a waste of meat, but to seek his magical or divinatory help was to invite perilous delusions that, like opium, increased a poor mortal's reliance on these pretenders to divinity.

But magic and divination had begun to be joined in thought before the Christians arrived, as we have seen at several points earlier in this book. Already in Plato, *manteis* were lumped together with the creators of curse tablets, and in an ode by Pindar, Medea, one of antiquity's magic-workers *par excellence*, prophesies the future foundation of Cyrene in lavish detail (*Republic* 364b–365a; *Pythian* 4.11–56). A clue to one basis for this connection may be taken from the Hippocratic treatise *On the Sacred Disease*, which disparages those who purport to cure epilepsy by magical means. The treatise doesn't mention divination *per se*, but it does ascribe to the quack healers all kinds of skills that, as we saw in Chapter 4, were often ascribed to the independent *mantis* as well: purification, ritual-based healing and the chanting of incantations, for example. And over and over, what the author of the treatise criticizes these healers for is *pretending to know more than other people*.

Specifically, what the magician, the *mantis* and undoubtedly their close cousin the healer thought they knew more about were the worlds that lay beyond ours – the world of the gods and the world of the dead – and how to communicate with them. Such knowledge brought power, of course: magic gave a magician or his client enhanced means of affecting the feelings and behavior of others; divination enabled a *mantis* or his client to foresee events and adjust their actions to take advantage of the circumstances. The collapse of these two goals is evident in some papyri spells that advise the magician to importune the god for a “better prophecy” if he is discontent with the first one, and in the much older custom of asking the great oracles to reconsider their initial responses when the enquirer was displeased: the “wooden walls” oracle that the Athenians received, for example, was their second one, given after they had complained to Apollo that the first one was too negative. Given this, it is neither necessary nor accurate to posit, as did W.R. Halliday, that divination was

a weakened form of magic, born out of the frustrated realization that one could not change the future but might at least predict it – nor is it necessary to posit, as did Martin Nilsson, that magic was a debased form of divination, developed by those who wanted to arrogate to their own ends the otherwise respectable art of observing signs (see pages 18 and 21 above; see also Halliday 1913; Nilsson 1941 and 1955).

If we are going to set up contrasting relationships, in fact, the most useful one would be between the Greek magician and the Greek *mantis*, on the one hand, and the Greek priest, on the other. In Greece, there were very few “professional” priests or priestesses, very few who kept the job for their whole lives or depended on it for their living. Instead, the priest-hoods of most cults rotated among members of the elite class (or members of elite sub-groups, such as certain noble families) – every Greek knew how to perform basic priestly duties. Things were different, as we have seen, for the *mantis* and magician, for whom the performance of rituals typically constituted a livelihood. We can also throw into this group the professional initiator (e.g., the Orphic priest, *orpheotelestēs*) whom I mentioned earlier in this book. In other words, it wasn’t only the *possession* of unusual knowledge that set apart the diviner and the magician (and the capability that this knowledge might give them to change things); it was also the fact that these people had *chosen* to obtain the unusual knowledge in the first place – had chosen to become religious entrepreneurs. It is here, most markedly, that the difference between, on the one hand, magic and divination as practiced by independent *manteis* and, on the other hand, mainstream religious practices shows up in ancient Greece.

Two of the characteristics that drew together magic and divination, then, are their common goals (extraordinary knowledge of ritual techniques and the power they could bring) and the fact that magic and divination were pursuits in which professional specialists could make a living. A third and closely related element reflects practicality. As many remarks in both this chapter and Chapter 4 have emphasized, magicians, like many *manteis* and for that matter most popular healers or mystery initiators as well, were freelancers, willing to expand their repertoire as their clientele demanded. This does not mean that every freelance magician was also a *mantis*, that every healer was also an initiator or that every *mantis* was a healer, but as a number of ancient sources make clear, including the passage from Plato just cited, the person who offered one skill usually offered some of the others as well. We can rightly characterize all of these pursuits as the marketing of “supplemental religious expertise” – these specialists made money selling what mainstream religion wasn’t offering – as long as we don’t allow the word “supplemental” to imply that such expertise was strictly a luxury and easily dispensable.

Perhaps a better way to think of the situation is to emphasize that the wares these experts sold were *more easily available* from them than from other venues. Similarly, if a contemporary city-dweller goes to a street kiosk, she sees before her cigarettes, postage stamps, magazines, chewing gum, pocket-combs and street maps. Many of these things could also be obtained at specialty shops if she chose to make the trip; in deciding to buy them at the kiosk, she might give up the chance to choose from a greater selection of wares or to buy a better-quality (and perhaps more prestigious) object; but this is made up for by convenience. So, too, with our freelancer: his initiations may not have been as impressive as those at Eleusis; his divinations may not have been as august as those at Delphi; his cures may have lacked the aura of the incubation shrine at Epidaurus – but they were readily available. The prestige afforded by location, as I discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, was a powerful thing – that is one reason that we still find Apollo invoked as “Delphian” or “Clarian” in divinatory spells of the papyri. But not everyone could make the journey.

These observations have the advantage of freeing us from seeking a strict ontological identity that binds together all of the tasks performed by the *mantis*, the magician, or any individual who combined the talents of the two. (And, incidentally, it also resonates with Aristotle’s discussion of *manteis* operating alongside merchants selling salt, fish and medicines – the “kiosk model” is more than just a modern analogy: *Economics* 2.2.3.) We are still left to deal with institutional oracles, however. In the last paragraph, I used them as a point of contrast for the *mantis* and magician, who were bound together by an advantage of local convenience that the oracles could not offer. And yet, earlier in this section, I suggested that divination and magic were drawn together by their claims to enhanced knowledge and the power that knowledge might bring – certainly, there is no point of contrast *here* between oracles and independent practitioners (be they called *manteis* or magicians or anything else). It may seem somewhat surprising, therefore, that we don’t hear anything about the great oracles either being associated with magic or themselves claiming some authority in this arena. In earlier periods, Delphi had occasionally recommended that troubled cities hire independent agents whom we might style as magicians – Epimenides was one of them, and another case involved Delphi’s recommendation that Sparta hire *psychagōgoi* (“invokers of souls”) to stop problems that an angry ghost was causing at the temple of Athena. Dodona had once been asked whether an enquirer should hire a particular *psychagōgos* named Dorius, and Claros warned a city that a magician was using wax figures and magical poisons to send the plague against it. Branchus, the first prophet at Didyma, used what



looks like a magical spell to cleanse the people of Miletus after a plague (pages 122–4, 70, 80 and 84 above; on Sparta see Johnston 1999: 108–9). Certainly, there is no reason to think that the oracles opposed magic (even if they told a city how to combat a particular magician), but there is no record of them particularly encouraging or endorsing practices that can be called “magical,” either (we never hear about them handing out improved versions of spells, for example, or recommending better ways to make curse tablets). Given that the oracles continually advocated the establishment of new cults or new rituals within old cults, this is interesting. What might explain it?

Part of the answer probably lies in the immediacy of most demands that magic is called on to address (the lover who is straying, the chariot race tomorrow on which one has placed a bet) and the small scale of most such situations (the illness of one’s *own* child, the threat to one’s *own* crops). For problems like these, one needed help quickly and one couldn’t count on one’s neighbors to help launch an expedition to Delphi or Claros. In other words, we are back to the issue of convenience vs. prestige, with magic once again falling on the side of convenience. Notably, on the few occasions when the oracles did involve themselves even indirectly with magic, which I mentioned in the last paragraph, the problem usually affected an entire city and had been going on for some time. The exception, the enquiry about the *psychagōgos* named Dorius, notably is from one of the Dodonian lead tablets, a means of oracular divination that was more likely than others to be used for personal concerns, as we saw in Chapter 2. Perhaps, if we had more evidence for the questions asked of the lot oracle at Delphi, and a fuller publication of the Dodonian lead tablets, our picture might change – we might find magic coming into oracular consultations more frequently than we do now.

But another part of the answer may lie in the fact that the oracles had no need to become purveyors of magical techniques or advice – they had business enough without it. Perhaps they even perceived disengagement from magic as a way of defining themselves more clearly from their competition, the independent diviner. Their willingness to take on theological issues in later periods shows that they were not closed to change, but theological issues, after all, are more clearly an extension of what oracles had always done – clarify for mortals who the gods were and what they wanted – than handing out magical techniques would have been. If there is an essential difference between the two categories of divination that I have examined in this book, then, it may really come down to business, in the end: Apollo could afford choose his clientele and restrict his services – the working *mantis* could not.



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